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The Wilderness Trail

Francis William Sullivan, Douglas Duer, W.J. Watt & Company

OF
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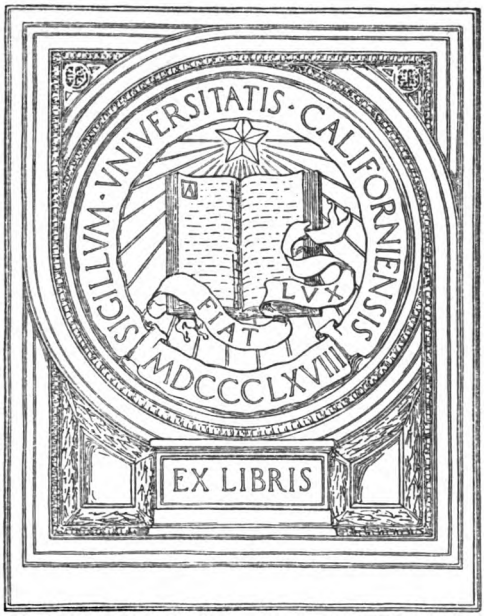

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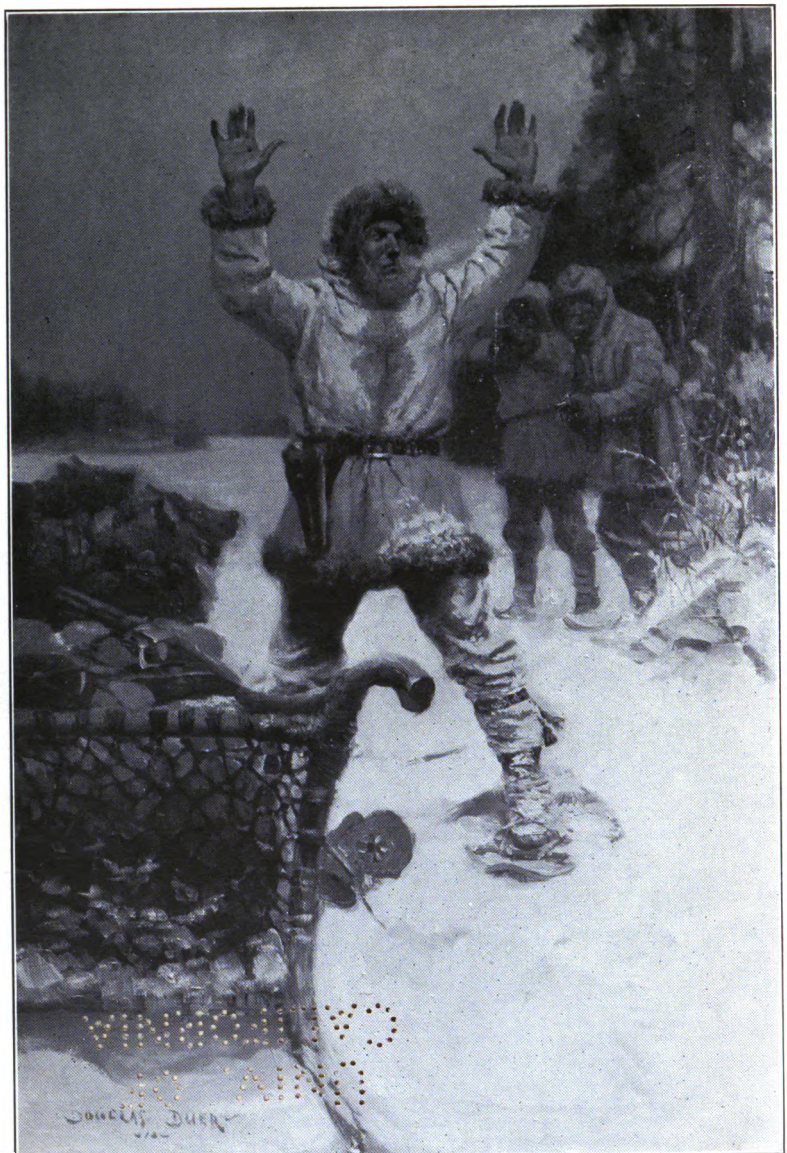

ey were white men and the captain of Fort Dickey recognized one of them as Vaudrin, the French trapper. His hands went slowly up.

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THE WILDERNESS TRAIL

By

FRANK WILLIAMS pseud.

Francis W. Williams

Illustrations by

DOUGLAS DUER

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THE WILDERNESS TRAIL

CHAPTER I

UP FOR JUDGMENT

"AND you accuse me of that?"

Donald McTavish glared down into the heavy, ugly face of his superior — a face that concealed behind its mask of dignity emotions as potent and lasting as the northland that bred them.

"I accuse you of nothing." Fitzpatrick pawed his white beard. "I only know that a great quantity of valuable furs, trapped in your district, have not been turned in to me here at the factory. It is to explain this discrepancy that I have called you down by dogs in the dead of winter. Where are those furs?" He looked up out of the great chair in which he was sitting, and regarded his inferior with cold insolence. For half an hour now, the interview had been in progress, half an hour of shame and dismay for McTavish, and the same amount of satisfaction for the factor.

"I tell you I have no idea where they are," returned the post captain. "So far as I know, the

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usual number of pelts have been traded for at the fort. If any have disappeared, it is a matter of the white trappers and the Indians, not my affair."

"Yes," agreed the other suavely; "but who is in charge of Fort Dickey?"

"I am."

"Then, how can you say it is not your affair when the Company is losing twenty thousand pounds a year from your district?"

The young man ground his teeth helplessly, torn between the desire to throttle ugly old Fitzpatrick where he sat, or to turn on his heel, and walk out without another word. He did neither. Either would have been disastrous, as he well knew. He had not come up three years with the spring *brigade* from the Dickey and Lake Bolsover without knowing the autocratic, almost royal, rule of old Angus Fitzpatrick, factor at Fort Severn for these two decades.

So, now, he choked back his wrath, and walked quietly up and down, pondering what to do. The room was square, low, and heavily raftered. Donald had to duck his head for one particular beam at each passage back and forth. Beneath his feet were great bearskins in profusion; a moose's head decorated one end of the place. The furniture was heavy and home-made.

At last, he turned upon the factor.

"Look here!" he said simply. "What have you got against me? You know as well as I do that there isn't another man in your whole district you

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would call in from a winter post to accuse in this way. What have I done? How have I failed in my duty? Have I taken advantage of my position as the chief commissioner's son?"

Fitzpatrick pawed his beard again, and shot a sharp, inquisitive glance at the young captain. That mention of his father's position was slightly untoward. In turn, he pondered a minute.

"Up to this time," he said at last, "you have done your work well. You know the business pretty thoroughly, and your Indians seem to be contented. I have nothing against you —"

"No," burst out McTavish, "you have nothing against me. That's just it. Virtues with you are always negative; never have I heard you grant a positive quality in all the time I have known you. And, to be frank, I think that you have something against me. But what it is I cannot find out." He paused eloquently before the white-haired figure that seemed as immovable as a block of granite.

"This is hardly the time for personalities, McTavish," said the other, harshly. "What I want to know is, what steps will you take to restore the furs that have disappeared from your district?"

"How do you know they have disappeared from my district?" Donald blazed forth.

"I know everything in this country," replied Fitzpatrick, dryly.

"Then, am I under the surveillance of your spying Indians?"

"Enough!" roared the factor, at last roused

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from his calm. "I am not here to be questioned. Answer me! What are you going to do?"

McTavish dropped his clenched hands with a gesture of hopeless weariness.

"I'll swallow your insulting innuendoes, and try to dig up some evidence to support your accusation," he said, quietly. "If I get track of any leakage, I'll do my best to stop it. If not, you shall learn as soon as possible."

"The leakage exists," rejoined the factor, doggedly. "Plug the hole, or —" He paused suggestively.

"Or what?" cried the younger man, whirling upon him furiously.

"Plug the hole — that's all."

Shaking with the fury that possessed him, McTavish turned away from his chief, and walked to a window, lest he should lose all control of himself. But a thought came to him that restored the proud angle of his head, and crushed his anger into nothingness.

What McTavish yet had been the fool of a narrow-minded, disgruntled superior, and showed it by losing his temper? None. The name of McTavish rang down the hall of the Hudson Bay Company's history like a bugle. Three generations of them had served this fearful master — he was the third. His father, now chief commissioner, had served an apprenticeship of twenty years in the wilds, beginning as a mere lad. He himself, when barely fifteen, had felt the call in his blood, and gone out

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on the trail with Peter Rainy, a devoted Indian of his father's. Peter was still with him, but now as body-servant, and not as instructor in woodcraft.

Donald thought of these things as he looked out of the chunky, square window into the snow-muffled courtyard. So engrossed was he that he failed to hear the door of the room open, and the light footfalls of Tee-ka-mee, Fitzpatrick's bowman and body-servant. The Indian, sensing some unpleasantness in the air, went directly to the factor, and handed him a message, explaining that Pierre Cardepie, one of McTavish's companions at the Dickey River post, had sent it by Indian runner.

Through the window the post-captain saw opposite him a corner made by two walls meeting at right angles. Even in summer, they were stout, heavy walls; but, now, with twenty feet of snow muffling and locking them in an unshakable grip, they were monstrous. Above the walls, a bastion of squared logs, looped-holed for four- and six-pounders, rose. There was another one at the opposite corner of the square, and together they commanded all approaches.

Angus Fitzpatrick opened the message Tee-ka-mee handed to him, and read it. His only sign of emotion was the lifting of an eyebrow. Then, he waved the Indian out.

"McTavish!" he called sharply, and the younger man turned wearily from the window to face his superior.

"I suppose you know that half-breed, Charley

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Seguis, in your district? He comes up with the *brigade* every spring, I believe."

"Yes, I know him. He is a skilful trapper and a half-breed of remarkable intelligence."

"Huh! That's the trouble; he's got too much intelligence to make him safe as a half-breed. What do you know about him? Is he a bad one?"

"Quite the contrary, so far as I have observed."

"Well, he's been bad this time. Read that." Fitzpatrick handed Cardepie's scrawl to McTavish, and watched keenly as the latter read:

SIR:

Yesterday Charley Seguis murder Cree Johnny. No reason I can find. I send this by runner so Mr. McTavish get it before he starts back.

CARDEPIE.

"That's most remarkable, sir," said Donald, genuinely puzzled. "I never would have suspected Charley of that. He has brains enough to know the consequences of murder. I can't understand it."

"Neither can Cardepie, evidently. He says he knows no reason for the deed." Fitzpatrick heaved himself up, and leaned forward interestedly. "You know," he went on, "that this thing cannot go unpunished. Charley Seguis must be captured, and brought to the fort here."

"Will the mounted police get here before —?" began McTavish.

"The mounted police be hanged! There are only seven hundred of them, and they have to cover

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a country as big as Siberia. You don't suppose I'm going to wait for them, do you? Nominally, they're the law here, but literally I and the men under me are. Retribution in this case must be swift and sure, as it always has been from Fort Severn." Fitzpatrick paused to breathe.

"Then, you mean that I must go out and get him," Donald interpreted, calmly.

"You spare me the trouble of saying it," replied the other. "When can you start?"

"In three hours."

Fitzpatrick glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Too late now," he said. "Better wait until to-morrow. The feed and the night's rest will do you good. Whatever happens, you've got to be faster than that half-breed." He paused a minute. "If you go at dawn, I probably won't see you again. In that case, let me remind you, McTavish, of the matter of which we were speaking before this murder came up. I—"

"You don't need to remind me. I remember it perfectly." Donald moved toward the door.

Fitzpatrick leaned still farther forward in his great chair, his eyes glinting, his lips curved in a snarl.

"And don't forget," he rasped at the other's back, "that I want that half-breed, dead or alive — and that he's a mighty fast man with a gun!"

The young man vouchsafed no reply, but passed out of the door that Tee-ka-mee opened from the other side.

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For fully a minute after the door had closed, Fitzpatrick continued to lean forward, the snarl on his lips, the evil light in his eyes. Then he fell back heavily, with a harsh, mirthless cackle.

"If he only knew — if he only knew!" he muttered to himself. "He must know soon, or there won't be half the pleasure in it for me."

Then, thirst being upon him, he clanged the bell for Tee-ka-mee, and that faithful servitor, divining the order, brought the aged factor wherewithal to warm himself.

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CHAPTER II

ILL REPORT

DONALD found Peter Rainy gossiping with a couple of the Indian servants in the barracks, and informed his attendant of the intended departure next morning. Then, he returned to the factor's house, unexpected and unaccompanied, and was admitted silently by an Indian woman, into whose hand he slipped a tiny mirror by way of recompense.

"Will you tell Miss Jean that I'm here?" he said, in the soft native Ojibway of the woman.

She nodded assent, and disappeared, only the sharp creaking of the stairs under her tread betraying her movements. For some time, then, Donald sat alone in the low-ceiled parlor. At one end of the room a roaring fire burned in the rough stone fireplace; there were a couple of tables along either wall, with mid-Victorian novels scattered over them; Oriental rugs and great furs smothered the floor, and there was even a new mahogany davenport in one corner, which the yearly ship from England had brought the summer before. While the room of the other interview was palpably that of the factor, there was something about this one, a certain pervasive touch of femininity, that marked it as that of the daughters of the house.

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After a few minutes, there sounded a second creaking of the stairs accompanied by a soft rustling that was not of Indian garments. Donald rose to his feet expectantly, his finely molded head inclined in an attitude of listening, and a flickering light in his dark-blue eyes. There was a moment's pause, and then a girl entered the narrow doorway.

She was tall, slender, and dressed in gray wool, warmed by touches of red velvet at waist and throat and cuffs. Her skin was clear and soft, toned to the rich hues of perfect health by the whipping winds of the North. Her eyes, too, were blue, but of a lighter color than were the man's, while her hair, against the firelight, was a flaming aureole of bronze.

Donald caught a quick breath of admiration, as he took the hand she held out to him. Each time, it came involuntarily—this breath of admiration. Last spring, when the *brigade* had come to the fort after the winter's trapping; last fall, when he had gone away from the fort, after a few weeks' hazardous attentions under the malicious eyes of old Fitzpatrick; and here, again, this winter. . . . And, as he saw her now, after their long separation, there arose in him a need as imperative as hunger, and as fierce. Years in the solitudes had instilled into Donald something of the habits and instincts of the animals he trapped, and now, as he approached thirty, this longing that was of both soul and body, laid hold of him with an unreasoning, compelling grip which could not be ignored.

"They told me you were here," said Jean Fitz-

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patrick, "and I think it nice of you to give one of your precious hours for a call on me."

"You know I would give them all if I could," returned McTavish, simply. "I would sledge the width of Keewatin for half a day with you."

"Donald, you mustn't say those things; I don't understand them quite, and, besides, father made himself clear about your privileges last summer, didn't he?"

McTavish looked at the girl, and told himself that he must remember her limitations before he lost his patience. For he knew that, despite her pure Scotch descent, she had never been more than two days' journey from Fort Severn in all her life. The only men she had ever known were Indians, half-breeds, French-Canadians, and a few pure-white fort captains like himself. And of these last, perhaps three in all her experience had been worthy an hour's chat. And, as to these three, orders emanating from the secret councils in Winnipeg had moved them out of her sphere before she had more than merely met them.

Innocent, but not ignorant (for her eyes could see the life about her), she was the product of an unnatural environment, the foster-child of hardship, grim determination, and abrupt destiny. Donald remembered these things, as, with less patience, he recalled the fact that old Fitzpatrick was opposed to Jean's marrying until Laura, the elder sister, had been taken off his hands. This had been intimated from various sources during the turbulent weeks of

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the summer, and Jean was now referring to it again.

Had old Fitzpatrick possessed the eyes of Jean's few admirers, he would have laid the blame for his predicament on his angular first-born, where it belonged, and not on the perversity of young men in general.

"Look here, Jean," said Donald, after grave consideration. "You are old enough to think for yourself — twenty-four, aren't you?" The girl nodded assent.

"Well, then," he continued, "please don't remind me of what your father said last summer, if it is in opposition to our wishes and desires."

"I wouldn't if it was in opposition to them," she retorted, calmly. He looked at her with startled eyes, a sudden, breathless pain stabbing him.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean, Donald," she replied, looking at him squarely with her fearless, truthful eyes, "that last summer was a mistake, as far as I am concerned."

"Jean!" McTavish rose to his feet unsteadily, his face white with pain. "Jean! What has happened? What have I done? What lies has anyone been telling you?" He spoke in a sharp voice; yet, even in the midst of his bewilderment, he could not but admire her straightforward cutting to the heart of the matter. There was no coquetry or false gentleness about her. That was the pattern of his own nature and he loved her the more for it.

She shrugged her shoulders in the way he adored, and smiled wanly.

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"There's an Indian proverb that says, 'When the wind dies, there is no more music in the corn,'" she replied. "There is no more music in my heart, that is all."

"What made it die?"

"I can't tell you."

"Evil reports about me?" he snarled suddenly, drawing down his dark brows, and fixing her with piercing eyes that had gone almost black.

"Not evil reports; merely half-baked rumors that, really, had very little to do with you, after all. Yet, they changed me." She was still wholly frank.

"Who carried them to you?" he demanded tensely, the muscles of his firm jaws tightening as his teeth clenched. "Tell me who spread them, and I'll run him to earth, if he leads me through the heart of Labrador."

"I don't know," she returned earnestly, rising in her turn. "That's the trouble with rumors. They're like a summer wind; they go everywhere unseen, but everyone hears them, and none can say out of which direction they first came or when they will cease blowing. I don't know."

Baffled, shocked, embittered, Donald turned passionately upon her.

"You don't know what was in my heart when I came here to-day," he cried. "You don't know what has been in it ever since the fall when the *brigade* went south. I need you. I want you. This winter, everything has gone against me, but the thought of your sympathy and affection made those troubles easy

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to bear. I stand now under the shadow of such a despicable thievery as the lowest half-breed rarely commits. They say I cache and dispose of furs for my own profit — I, in whom honor and loyalty to the Company have been bred for a hundred years. To-morrow I start out on the almost hopeless task of proving myself innocent. And not only that! A half-breed in my district, Charley Seguis, has murdered an Indian, and I, as captain of Fort Dickey, must run him to earth, and bring him back here, if I can get the drop on him first. If I can't—but never mind that part of it. My honor and even my life are at stake, but those are little things, if I know you love me. I wanted to go away to-morrow with the knowledge of your faith in me, and the promise that, when I came back, we might be married. Oh, Jean, I need you, I need you, and now —" He broke off abruptly.

The girl had paled beneath her tan. She stood looking at him, her hands gripped tightly together in front of her, her eyes wide with wonder and perplexity.

"I can't help it, Donald," she said, in a low voice. "I'm sorry, truly I am sorry. I — I didn't know these things. And, perhaps, you'll be shot, you say? No, that must not be. You must come back, even if things aren't what they were."

"You do care for me!" cried McTavish eagerly, stepping toward her.

"Yes, yes, I do; but not the way you mean," she stammered, a sudden instinctive fear of his mascu-

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line domination rising in her. "I can't marry you now, or when you come back, or — ever!"

The fire in the man's eyes died out; his frame relaxed hopelessly, and he fumbled for his fur cap.

"I'm sorry I spoke, Jean," he said, stretching out his hand. "Good-by."

Suddenly, the door leading into the rear room opened, and in the frame stood the heavy figure of Angus Fitzpatrick, his eyes glittering under the beetling white brows. For a silent moment, he took in the scene before him.

"Jean," he said harshly, "what does this mean? You know my orders. Do you disobey me?"

The girl flushed painfully.

"Mr. McTavish is going now, father," she said, quietly. "I'm sending him away."

"I'll look to that Indian woman," muttered Fitzpatrick. "She had orders not to admit him." Then, aloud:

"Mr. McTavish, in the future, kindly do not confuse your business at this factory with your personal desires. I do not wish it."

"Very well," replied the captain impersonally, without looking at the factor.

His eyes were fixed hungrily upon the face of the girl, searching for a sign of tender emotion. But there was none. Only confusion, fear, and surprise struggled for mastery there. Hopelessly, he bowed stiffly to her, and went out of the door.

Crossing the courtyard by a path that was a veritable cañon of snow, he gained his quarters in the

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barracks. There, he found Peter Rainy, gaunt and with a wrinkled, leathern face, starting to gather the packs for the early start next morning. Donald filled and lit his pipe solemnly, and then sat down to ponder.

Something intangible and ill-favored had been streaked across the clean page of his life. Angus Fitzpatrick's increasing malice toward him was not the sudden whim of an irascible old man. He knew that, all other things being equal, the factor was really just, in a rough and ungracious way. Any other man in the service would have hesitated long before accusing him, with his father's and grandfather's records, glorious as they were, and his own unimpeachable, as far as he knew. Some event or circumstances over which he had no control had raised itself, and defamed him to these persons who held his honor and his happiness in their hands. This much he sensed; else why had the factor taken such half-hidden, but malicious, joy in sending him forth on these two Herculean tasks; else, why had the rumor poisoned the mind of Jean against him, and held her aloof and unapproachable?

That Jean should not love him under the circumstances did not surprise him, but he groped in vain for an explanation of old Fitzpatrick's evident hatred. The old factor and the elder McTavish, now commissioner, had known each other for years, the latter's incumbency of the York factory having kept them in fairly close touch. This in itself, thought Donald, should be a matter in his favor,

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and not an obstacle, as it appeared to be. Pondering, searching, he racked his weary brain feverishly until Peter Rainy unobtrusively announced that dinner was ready. Then, occupied with other things, he put the matter from his mind.

The sluggish dawn had barely cast its first glow across the measureless snows when Rainy roused him from heavy sleep. After a breakfast of boiled fat, meat, tea and hard bread, they gathered the four dogs together, and with much difficulty got them into traces. Mistisi, the leader, a bad dog when not working, strained impatiently in the moose-hide harness. Donald, when the packs had been strapped securely on, gave a quick final inspection, and then a word that sent the train moving toward the gate in the wall.

But few men were about, and an indifferent wave of the hand from these sped the party on its way. Outside the gate, Peter Rainy took the lead, breaking a path for the dogs with his snowshoes, while McTavish walked beside the loaded sled. Their course ran westward up the frozen Dickey River, which now lay adamant beneath the iron cold and drifting snow. Forty miles they would follow it, to the fork that led on the north to Beaver Lake, and on the south to Bolsover. Taking the south branch, they would then struggle across the wind-swept body of water, and follow the river ten miles farther, to a headland upon which stood the snow-muffled blockhouse of Fort Dickey.

If you draw a straight line north from Ashland,

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Wisconsin, and follow it for six hundred and fifty miles, you will find yourself in the vicinity of Fort Dickey, in the midst of the most appalling wilderness on the face of the globe. In that journey, you will have crossed Lake Superior and the great tangle of spruce that extends for two hundred miles north of it. North of Lake St. Joseph, which is the head of the great Albany River, whence the waters drain to Hudson Bay, you will strike north across the Keewatin barrens. Bald, fruitless rocks, piled as by an indifferent hand; great stretches of almost impenetrable forest, ravines, lakes, rivers, and rapids; all these will hinder and baffle your progress. Add to such conditions snow, ice, and eighty degrees of frost, and you have the situation that Donald McTavish faced the day he left Fort Severn.

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CHAPTER III

A MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE

"WHAT do you know about this murder?" Donald sat at the dinner table in Fort Dickey with John Buller and Pierre Cardepie, his two assistants. A roaring log fire barely fought off the cold as they ate their caribou steak, beans, bread, and tea.

"Not much," replied Buller. "The day after you left, one of the Indians tore in at midnight with the news. He said that he and his partner, the murdered man, had been met by Charley Seguis while running their trap-line, and that Charley had drawn the other aside in private conversation. Half an hour later, there had been sudden words, followed by blows, and, before Johnny could defend himself, Seguis had stabbed him. What they had been talking about the Indian didn't know, for Charley had hurried off immediately after the murder."

"What direction did he take?" asked McTavish.

"The rumor declared that he went north, toward Beaver Lake."

"Could he give any motive for the deed?"

"No. So far as he knew, Johnny had never seen Charley Seguis before."

"Well, boys, I'm off in the morning after him.

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The factor is particularly keen for having him brought in right away. He also wants to know what I have done with all the furs that he claims have disappeared from this district during the last year." Donald's tone was contemptuous.

"I didn't know any had disappeared," said Buller, in amazement.

"Nor me!" I tink dat Feetzpatreeck ees gone crazy in hees old age," added Cardepie, with a snort.

"Well, whatever it is, he claims the Company has lost twenty thousand pounds, and that I'm to blame for it," said Donald.

"There's something wrong here, Mac," remarked Buller, decisively. "This isn't all accident, and, if you say so, I'll go with you to-morrow."

"It's awfully good of you, John, but I think I'll tackle it alone." And McTavish wearily rose from the table.

The next morning, he again took the trail, but this time alone. On his feet were the light moose-webbed snowshoes; from head to heel, he was clad in white caribou such as the Indian hunters affect, and on his *capote* he bore the branching antlers that were left there as a decoy for the wary animals. With a long whip in one hand and his rifle held easily in the other, he strode beside the straining dog-train. In the east, the frost-mist hung low like a fog. In the south, the sun, which barely showed itself above the horizon each day, was commencing to engrave faint tree shadows on the snow. The west was purplish gray, but the north was unrelent-

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ing iron. There was no beaten path to guide him now, and sometimes the trees were so closely set as barely to permit the passage of the sledge. On the new snow could be seen the dainty tracks of ermine, and beside them the cleanly indented marks of a fox. There were triplicate clusters of impressions, showing where the hare had passed, and occasionally the huge, splayed imprints of a caribou. But, though the life of the wild creatures was teeming at this season, there was no sound in all the leagues of forest, except the sharp crack of some freezing tree-trunk and the noise of Donald's own passage.

Late in the afternoon the traveler found the cabin of a white trapper for which he had started that morning.

"Can you tell me where Charley Seguis is?" he asked.

"Went north, toward Beaver Lake, three days ago," replied the other, shortly. "He stopped here on his way up, and said he was looking for better grounds."

"Going to set out a new line of traps then, was he?"

"Yes, Mr. McTavish," assented the trapper.

"Thanks," said McTavish, gathering up the whip. "I must be going."

"What! Going to travel all night? Better stay and bunk with me."

"Can't do it, friend." And a few minutes later, the captain of Fort Dickey was on his way again.

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He knew that Charley Seguis had three days' start of him. He knew also that Charley was an exceptionally intelligent half-breed, and would travel well out of the district before allowing himself breathing space. McTavish intended surprising him by the swiftness of pursuit. So, lighted on his way by the brilliant stars and the silent, flaunting banners of the northern lights, he plodded doggedly on until midnight. Then he built a fire, thawed fish for the dogs, and prepared food for himself, finally lying down on his bed of spruce boughs, his feet to the flames.

Two hours before dawn found him shivering with bitter cold, and heaping logs upon the fire for the morning tea; and, while the stars were fading, Mistisi, his leader, plunged into the traces for the long day's march. It was grilling work. The cold seemed something vital, sentient, alive, which opposed him with all its might. The wind and snow appeared cunning allies of the one great enemy; and, to make matters worse, the very underbrush and trees themselves apparently conspired against this one microscopic human who dared invade the regions of death.

But Donald McTavish was not thinking of these things as he toiled north. His mind was centered on Charley Seguis, the Indian, the man who must be conquered. There lay his duty; hazardous, fatal, perhaps; but still his duty. It was the first law of the company that justice should be infallible among its servants, and right triumphant.

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Donald crossed the tracks of two hunters that morning, but saw no one. By this time, he was well into the Beaver Lake district. Seventy-five miles north were the low, desolate shores of Hudson Bay, and as many miles directly east lay Fort Severn. At the thought, a short spasm of pain clutched his heart, for he could not forget that the lonely post contained the world for him.

The splendors and luxuries of civilization in great cities were as nothing to him now. Only the vast wild, and this one wonderful creature of the wild, Jean Fitzpatrick, spoke to him in a language that he understood. He had vague recollections of operas and theaters and dances, and all the colorful life of Montreal and Winnipeg; but they only stirred within him a sense of imprisonment and unrest.

"Better to fight and die alone in the deep woods than to live all one's life as a jellyfish," was the concise fashion in which he summed the matter up.

At two o'clock that afternoon McTavish consulted a map he had made of the district near Fort Dickey, and laid his course for the trapping shanty of an Indian called Whiskey Bill. It was on the bank of a little beaver stream that debouched into Beaver River. The stream was frozen to a thickness of three feet, and Donald drove his dog team smartly down the snow-covered ice, riding on the sledge for the first time in many hours. But he finally arrived at Whiskey Bill's shanty only to find the place de-

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serted, and the little building slowly disintegrating under the investigations of animals.

"That's funny," thought Donald uncertainly. "I can't understand it at all. He said he was coming in to his old shanty on this fork of the Beaver when the fall trapping began."

He closely examined the rickety structure. It showed signs of having been inhabited up to a month previous. The woodsman shook his head in uncertain amazement, and again consulted his map. Ten miles father east, on the north shore of Beaver Lake, lived a Frenchman named Voudrin.

McTavish cracked his whip over the dogs' backs, and, leaping on the sledge as it passed, shot down the river to the big lake. But there, after a swift trip of an hour and a half, he found the same conditions. Voudrin's cabin, however, showed signs of more recent occupancy than had Whiskey Bill's. A pair of snowshoes bound high against the wall, an old pair of fur gloves, and a few pots and pans, indicated that the Frenchman would probably return. But, in the meantime, McTavish had these questions to answer: Where had the men gone? And why?

The swift darkness was coming on, and, in the absence of information regarding Seguis, Donald decided to spend the night in Voudrin's cabin, in the hope that the man might return by daylight. It was possible the Frenchman had a three-day line of traps, and was out making the rounds, camping in the forest trails, wherever darkness overtook him.

Though chafing at the delay and the tricks of cir-

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cumstance, Donald knew that he could do no better than follow this plan, and so set about unpacking for the night and preparing food for both himself and his dogs. Soon there was a roaring fire in the stone fireplace at the end of the one-room shanty, and the odor of frying meat pervaded the atmosphere. Presently, he went outside to cut fresh spruce boughs for the rough bunk.

In the woods he heard a noise. He looked up and found himself face to face with two silent Indians, who stood looking at him gravely. Although he was not sure, he thought he recognized them as a couple of the early risers that had waved him good-by the day he started from Fort Severn. The impression was only a passing one, however.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded the Scotchman, crisply.

For reply, one of the men reached inside his hunting-coat, and fumbled a moment. Then he drew forth a scrap of very dirty, wrinkled paper, which he extended without a word.

Amazed, Donald took it and tried to read the hastily scribbled contents. The handwriting alone made his heart leap with surprise and hope. It must have been five minutes before he finished struggling in the dim light. Then, with his face puckered in a scowl of perplexity, he turned to address the bearers of the message.

They were gone. So intense had been his concentration that they had shuffled away in the darkness unnoticed.

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Still scowling, Donald thrust the note into a pocket, gathered up a double armful of spruce boughs, and went inside the shanty. There, he sat down on an upturned box, and pulled forth the note again. He read:

If you wish to do the company a great service drop your pursuit of Charley Seguis and head for Sturgeon Lake. You will find there something of great importance, but what it is I have no idea, as my informants could not say. There is a gathering there, but I know nothing more than that. In sending this to you by bearers (they ought to reach Fort Dickey almost as you leave in search of Seguis), I am acting on my own responsibility. What you said the other day about my being old enough to think for myself has taken root, you see. If you profit by this suggestion I shall be happy.

Sincerely,
JEAN FITZPATRICK.

In a sort of stupefaction induced by many emotions clamoring for recognition at once, Donald sat staring at the fire while the meat burned black. In love though he was, first and foremost into his mind leaped consideration of the Company. He had been sent to hunt down a murderer. By the unwritten code, he must hang to the trail like a bulldog, even if the chase required six months and led him through the Selkirks to the Pacific. Charley Seguis must answer before a tribunal for his crime.

Now came this imperious call to drop the pursuit, and to take up something else, which was claimed to be of greater importance to the Company. That it

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was of great moment Donald was sure; else, Jean, a factor's daughter, would not have sent him the word. Since she sent it, why had it not been official from her father? Ah, yes; she had acted upon her own responsibility. Evidently, she had received word of this strange, new thing through the Indian woman who served her, and who hated her father. It was probably too indefinite to bring before the irascible old factor, and the girl had taken this method of protecting the Company, while at the same time giving him a chance for new laurels.

Knowing Jean's straightforward truthfulness, McTavish dared not disregard the message. He knew there was something in it, and something much more grave than either of them suspected, probably. But yet — to leave the trail of Charley Seguis! He shook his head distractedly, and came to his senses in time to rescue the pieces of caribou before they turned to cinders.

The fish for the dogs being softened to a certain pliancy, he fed the ravening animals, and then made a meal himself, sitting abstractedly on the up-ended box, his thawed bread in one hand and his chilling tea in the other. Meantime, he wrestled stubbornly with his problem. It was not until he had almost finished his first pipe that he came to a decision. Then, jumping up, he slapped his thigh, and cried aloud:

"By George! I'll do it. Charley Seguis can wait. I'll back Jean's common sense and intuition against the blue laws of the whole Hudson Bay Company."

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Presently, he began to dream over the last part of the almost impersonal letter, reading into it his own fond interpretations, and holding imaginary interviews with this girl, who looked like a saint in a stained-glass window, because of the glorious aureole of her red-bronze hair.

What a woman she was! What a woman! Innocent, clean-minded, vigorous, virile with that feminine aristocracy of perfect pureness! Ah, she was no wife for your dance-haunting young millionaire. The man who won her must fight for her, fight like a tiger for its young, fight even the girl herself, because in her unstirred nature was all the virginal resistance to surrender that belongs to a wild creature of the dim trails.

So, Donald dreamed on, while the traveling wolf-packs howled in the distance, the trees split with the report of ordnance, and the fire burned low.

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CHAPTER IV

INTO THE DANGER ZONE

FROM Voudrin's tumble-down shanty Sturgeon Lake was nearly a hundred miles southwest. Given rivers and lakes to traverse, McTavish could almost do the distance in a day, for Mistisi, his leader dog, was an animal of tremendous strength and remarkable intelligence. But in this wilderness of rock-strewn barrens and thick forest it would take at least two.

Leaving notice of his having occupied the cabin by marking a clean board with a charred ember, McTavish set forth again, and by the hardest kind of work covered fifty miles the first day. The second morning, finding caribou tracks, he delayed his departure until he had killed a fat cow, for his supplies were running low.

His way now led up one of the tiny tributaries of the Sachigo. At a point directly east of a little river that emptied into the southern end of Sturgeon Lake, he struck across country again until he reached this stream. From there his work was simpler, and the dogs, again on a river-bed, made fast time.

Having once determined to give up his chase of Charley Seguis temporarily, McTavish put the matter out of his mind, and bent all his energies to the

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work at hand. Late on the afternoon of the second day, he knew he was approaching the lake, and proceeded cautiously, hugging the banks with their dark background of forests. At length, the shore suddenly widened, and he looked across a vast expanse of glaring snow. Ten miles ahead, on the right shore of the lake, was a headland. Pointing this out to Mistisi, he set the dog's nose toward it, and climbed into the sledge. The lake seemed utterly deserted. No dark, moving figures betrayed the presence of men or dog-trains. Under cover of the growing darkness, he felt comparatively secure, and resolved to camp for the night under the lee of the headland.

And, now, a faint stirring of fear that Jean's message had been a false alarm took possession of him. If it were so, his pursuit of Charley Seguis was delayed just that much longer. No feeling of shame accompanied his thought. The certainty of ultimate success that has made the white man the inevitable ruler of wildernesses was strong in him. He merely did not like the prospect of the half-breed's additional start.

Reaching the headland, Donald halted the dogs, and disembarked. He had turned his back to unstrap the pack, when he heard a sound behind him.

"Hands up!" said a stern voice, and, whirling, McTavish looked into the barrels of two leveled rifles in the steady hands of as many men.

They were white men, and the captain of Fort Dickey recognized one of them as Voudrin, the French trapper. His hands went slowly up.

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Protected by the rifle of his companion, the other relieved Donald of the rifle, revolver, sheath-knife, and hooked-shaped hunter's knife. Then, they permitted him to lower his hands. Voudrin climbed into the sledge, and, shouting, "*Marche donc, marche donc,*" started the dogs around the headland. His companion followed on foot in company with the captive.

"What does this mean?" demanded McTavish savagely, his blue eyes dark with anger. "I am McTavish, of the Fort Dickey post, and, when the factor hears of this, it will go hard with you men. I am on official business, and I demand an explanation of such treatment."

"You'll have it soon enough," replied the other, unmoved. "You see, it isn't our idea that the factor hear of the occurrence."

There was something cold and threatening in his tone that caused Donald to eye the fellow curiously.

"Just what do you mean by that, my friend?" he inquired.

"Don't ask so many questions," replied the other curtly, and continued thereafter to maintain a stubborn silence.

On the far side of the headland they came upon very definite signs of civilization. Tucked into a little bay was a sort of settlement. A long, rough log house was the main building, and around it were grouped some score or more shanties such as that Voudrin had occupied on the Beaver River. On one side of the settlement, a high stockade of heavy tim-

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ber was set. It appeared that it was at first intended to surround the entire group, but that the cold weather had put a stop to the work.

Voudrin, with the dog-train and sledge, was already ashore on the beach where a number of men had run down from the large main building. These now advanced over the frozen lake to greet the two on foot. McTavish looked them over with keen eyes, memorizing their faces for future use. It was not long before he located Whiskey Bill and a number of the other hunters and trappers that were frequent visitors to the Dickey River-post.

In almost total silence, the procession reached the beach, and wound up the slight declivity to the large house in the center of the settlement. Here McTavish was led inside, and discovered that the building was divided off into a number of small rooms. Into one of these he was pushed, and the heavy door swung after him. A little while later an Indian packer appeared with the traps that had been taken off his sledge, and dumped them into the room, telling him to make his own supper. Nothing was missing, even matches, and McTavish built a small chip fire such as he was accustomed to burn on the trail, taking the material from a pile of seasoned logs in one corner of the room. The floor was beaten earth as hard as a rock.

Perplexed and amazed at the mysterious goings-on about him, the Scotchman vainly sought to explain the presence of the men here, and his own extraordinary position. Not for ten years, except in

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the case of the pursued criminal turning at bay, had an officer in the Company been subjected to such insulting and disrespectful treatment. Here, discipline and propriety, the two cardinal virtues among the Company's servants, had been grossly violated, and by men who knew the consequences.

Discipline and propriety! On those great beams of organization had the mighty structure of the Hudson Bay Trading Company been built. It was reverence for them that caused a dozen men a thousand miles from the nearest settlement to sit down to dinner in order of precedence, and be served correctly in that order. It was reverence for them that caused traders to thrash insolent Indians two years after their insults had been spoken!

And these men had violated all the canons of this discipline, frankly and completely, knowing the penalty, but evidently utterly careless of it. McTavish could not but feel a certain admiration for their daring. To him, as to nearly all of its servants, the Company was a huge, unseen, intangible force ; a stern monster that demanded of its subjects such loyalty and unfaltering obedience as patriots rarely give their country's cause. A stern, but kindly, master in good repute, and a grim, relentless avenger in ill.

When he had finished his meal, Donald McTavish filled his pipe, and lay along the ground on his couch made of robes, awaiting events.

Barely half an hour later, footsteps sounded outside the door, and a pounding upon it brought him

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to his feet. Presently the timbers swung back, and a man stood in the opening.

"Come with me," the newcomer said, and McTavish preceded him down the narrow corridor that ran the length of the long building.

Two-thirds of the distance they had walked, when suddenly the walls fell away, and Donald found himself in a large, low room, bare-floored and cheerless, that occupied the other third. Smoky torches of wood standing out from crevices in the logs gave light, and around the wall he could see perhaps fifty men, standing or squatting. Directly before him at the opposite end was a sort of low platform, on which a huge stump served for a table, and another smaller one, behind it, for a chair. A lone man stood there, looking at him. Owing to the smoke and the dim light, McTavish could not at first make out his features. Then, with a start of amazement he recognized him. . . . It was Charley Seguis.

How had he got here? What was he doing here, this intelligent half-breed? These and a hundred other questions flashed through the prisoner's mind.

Suddenly, Seguis began to speak. He was a tall, finely-formed man, with a clearness of cut to his features that betokened English parentage on the one side, and the blood of chiefs on the other.

"We are in council to-night to decide what to do with Captain McTavish," he said slowly, using the excellent English at his command. "How he has come here, I do not know. Who told him of the Free-Traders' Brotherhood, I do not know. As one

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man against another, we have nothing against him. He was always good to us, and gave us large presents for our best skins. But he is one of the Hudson Bay men, and, therefore, something must be done. It must be done quickly. We are in council; each man shall have his say."

Donald's eyes had become more and more accustomed to the dimness in the huge room. Now, looking about, he saw great bales of pelts piled indiscriminately, thousands and thousands of dollars' worth. So, these were free-traders! This was the magnet that had drawn the hardy trappers from their allegiance to the Hudson Bay! He shrugged his shoulders. Whatever happened to him, it was they who would suffer in the end, for this mighty, intangible thing, the Company, did not look kindly upon free-traders. Ever since 1859, when the monopoly legally expired, free-traders had been at war with the great concern, and in the Northwest had established a brisk and growing competition.

But here, in the vast district between Labrador and the west shore of the bay, their invasions had, without exception, met with failure. More than that, those brave men who had undertaken to beard this lion in his iron wilderness had very rarely returned to tell the tale of the bearding. Warned once or twice, the more timid retired, baffled and unsuccessful. Persistent, the trader fell a victim to gun "accidents," canoe "upsets," or even starvation carefully engineered by unseen, but competent, agents.

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All these things were traditions of the Company, and McTavish had been brought up on them. He had never taken part in such doings, but he was certain in his own mind that they were not all fiction, for such fictions do not spring to life miraculously in regions where emotions are naked and primitive, and existence is pared down to the raw.

Here were men who had evidently banded themselves into a Free-Traders' Brotherhood. How many had enlisted in its ranks besides those in this room, he had no idea; perhaps there were hundreds. It had evidently been well organized, for it had taken shape with amazing swiftness and certainty.

Jean had been right. This was more important, vastly more important, than the pursuit of a renegade half-breed. . . . But that half-breed was himself at the head of the organization.

"That's what half an intelligence will do for a man!" said McTavish to himself, with contempt. "This fellow is just bright enough to be better than his class. He therefore immediately sets himself up as a leader to buck the Company. God help him!"

But the captain's thoughts almost immediately turned to his own case. What was that old Indian saying? He listened.

"In the past history of the Company, when a rival appeared, there had been much killing. Murder, violence, intrigue, conspiracy — all these have flourished when a rival took the field. We may look for

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them now, and he who strikes first forestalls the other. It is, of course, impossible for this Captain McTavish to reach Fort Dickey or Fort Severn again. Three sentences from him, and we are discovered, and the chase begun. We are not strong enough yet for open conflict. By spring, perhaps, but not now. McTavish must never tell. A strong arm, a well-directed blow —"

"But, my good brother, you do not counsel murder in cold blood?" asked Seguis, in a tone of horror. "To kill our old friend, Captain McTavish, because he has happened to come upon us here — oh, no, no, no! It is impossible. But, yet," he added, "he must not tell what he has seen."

He turned to McTavish.

"Will you give an oath never to reveal what you have seen and heard here?"

"No," Donald said bluntly. "I won't."

"By refusal, you sign your own death-warrant," warned the half-breed, not unkindly. "For the sake of all of us, give this oath."

"Seguis," replied Donald, just as quietly, "you know you ask the impossible. Let's not waste any more time over it. Decide what you are going to do with me — and do it!"

"Why not keep him with us here a prisoner?" suggested an old buck; only to be cried down loudly as a doddering dotard, whose blood had turned to water.

"What?" one shouted, wrathfully. "Have an-

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other mouth to feed all winter, while the owner of it stays idle? Never! Anyone that eats with us must work."

For a long minute, Seguis sat with his chin in his hand, meditating. Then, he ordered Donald's captors to take their prisoner back to the little room, saying:

"I have a plan in mind, which we must discuss — privately, out of the captain's hearing." He turned to the Hudson Bay man, and spoke decisively: "You shall hear our decision to-night, sir, whatever it is."

Without answer, Donald wheeled, and walked away in the company of his guards to the room that served as a cell, where again he was left in solitary confinement.

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CHAPTER V

DEATH TRAIL

IT was, perhaps, an hour later when Donald, just beginning to drowse before his little fire, heard someone approach and unlock his door, for the second time that night. In anticipation of any desperate emergency, the captive sprang to his feet, and retreated to a corner of the room farthest from the door, watching with wary eyes for his visitor's appearance.

"Who is it?" he demanded, as the door was flung open.

"It's me, Charley Seguis," was the reply, in the voice of the half-breed. Even in this moment of stress, Donald noticed half-wonderingly the mellow cadences in the voice of this man of mixed blood. While speaking, Seguis had entered the room, and he now shut the door behind him. "I come friendly," he continued, with a suggestion of softness in his tones, though there was no lack of firmness. "I wish to talk friendly for half an hour. Will you sit with me by the fire?"

"I don't trust you, Seguis," retorted Donald, bluntly. "If you have been delegated by lot to kill me, do it at once. That would be the only possible kindliness from you to me. I can stand anything bet-

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ter than waiting. . . . I am unarmed — as you know."

The half-breed shook his head slowly, as though in mourning that his intentions should be thus questioned.

"I don't come to harm you," he said at last, with a certain dignity. "I've given you my word that I come friendly. I am armed, but that is to prevent your attacking me."

Donald uttered an ejaculation of impatience.

"Absurd!" he exclaimed. "Why should I attack you?" For the instant, in realization of his own plight, he had forgotten that the original purpose of his quest had been the capture of this man who was now become his captor. . . . But the half-breed's words recalled the fact forcibly enough.

"Don't you suppose, captain, that I've known you were on my trail for days? I have the sense to know that. But what brought you veering off the trail to Sturgeon Lake is beyond me."

Donald heaved a sigh of relief. At least, Jean's message was unknown to the leader of the free-traders, and there would be no risk of the girl's suffering in person for her loyal zeal. In this relief, his thoughts reverted curiously to the crime he had been sent to revenge.

"Did you kill Cree Johnny?" he demanded, abruptly.

The face of the half-breed remained immobile, inscrutable.

"I'll tell you nothing about that," was the crisp

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reply. "Let's talk of what is more important now, and that is yourself — and what's to become of you."

"As you will," Donald agreed, grudgingly. It wounded his self-esteem that this man should be able thus to manage the interview at pleasure. Yet, even while his anger mounted high, the Scotchman felt himself compelled to an involuntary admiration for the authoritative composure in the manner of one who, by the accident of birth, was no better than a barbarian — was, indeed, something worse, since the crossing of the civilized blood with the savage is usually a disastrous thing. This was the Hudson Bay man's first experience of indignity visited on himself, and, for that reason, he felt a double humiliation over the seriousness of his situation. Exasperation grew in him over the fact that even now his many and varied emotions did not include in the least such repulsion as he had imagined a tête-à-tête with a murderer must produce. On the contrary, he was aware of an indefinable air of genuineness, of nobility even, about this Montagnais Englishman. It was incredible, surely — none the less, it was true. Donald's instinct set him to wondering involuntarily whether, after all, the man before him could really be guilty of the crime charged. His reason rallied to argument that this fellow was of a vicious strain, capable of any treachery, of any cowardly violence. In such as Seguis, the vices of two races blend, for vice knows little distinction of tribe or creed; the mingling of a dozen bloods will but serve to strengthen the violence in each. The virtues, on the

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contrary, are matters of geography, in great part — to each race its own. They are prone to vanishing in the mixed blood. Usually, too, the civilized white man who degrades himself to mate with a savage woman is himself a wastrel, essentially evil, likely to beget nothing good.

Such reasoning is sound enough, in the main, as Donald, despite his bewilderment, knew well. Nevertheless, in this instance the product of miscegenation seemed to offer in his own person a subtle contradiction. The man stood in a serenity that proclaimed an assured self-respect. The dark eyes above the high cheekbones were glowing clearly, as they stared in level interrogation on the prisoner. The features, coarse, yet of a pleasing harmoniousness, were set in lines of a strength that was at once calm and masterful. Whatever might be the blackness hidden in his heart, the half-breed's outer seeming was one to command respect. . . . In quick appreciation of the truth, Donald was constrained to admit that his own conduct thus far had not been of a sort to match the courtesy of his jailer.

"What do you want to say to me about myself?" he questioned, finally; his voice came milder than hitherto.

Seguis answered immediately, with directness.

"After an hour in council, I come here, delegated by the brotherhood, to make you a proposition." His gaze met that of his prisoner fairly, as he continued: "The Hudson Bay Company is a hard master, as you know very well. It expects more, and gives less,

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than any other organization in the world. If it's hard to us, then it's, also, hard to you. After your years with the Company, do you think you've achieved the position you deserve? Certainly not! We're all agreed on that." The half-breed appeared to hesitate for a moment, then threw back his head proudly, in a gesture of resolve, and continued with a new emphasis in his words.

"Can't you see that your superior, the factor at Fort Severn, hates you bitterly? I, myself — I've seen things there. Last summer, I was at the fort, you remember. I was there all the time you were. I watched you — and Miss Jean —"

"Stop!" Donald interrupted, furiously. . . . He fought back his rage as best he might, and went on less violently. "Now, no more of this beating about the bush. Just say what you have to say, and begone!"

Seguis remained wholly undisturbed by the outburst. At once, he went on speaking, imperturbably:

"I was about to state," he said evenly, "that I have noticed the factor's expression behind your back, and I want to warn you against him. He's your superior, you know, Captain McTavish. Well, then, how can you expect to rise in the Company, when he's your enemy?" He paused, waiting for a reply.

Again, Donald experienced a sensation that was akin to dismay. He had not expected such perspicacity on the part of one whom he had contemptuously esteemed as merely a savage. Moreover, in

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addition to his indignant confusion over the introduction of Jean's name into the conversation, there was something vastly disturbing to him in realization of the fact that his own belief of hostility on the part of the factor was thus proven by the observation of the half-breed. To hide his disconcertment, the young man ignored the question of Seguis, and spoke sharply:

"Get to the point — if there is one!"

"The point's this," came the instant reply, uttered with a slight show of asperity; "that we, the Brotherhood of Free-Traders, offer you a position with us — at our head, if you'll take it. In other words, I'll step down to second place — if you'll step up to first."

Donald stared at the speaker in amazement that any one should dare in such fashion to suggest the possibility of his turning traitor. Seguis, however, endured his angry scrutiny without any lessening of the tranquillity that had characterized him throughout the interview. So, since silent rebuke failed completely, the Hudson Bay official was driven to verbal expression of his resentment.

"What cause have I ever given for you to believe that I was anything but loyal to the Company?' he demanded, harshly.

"None," Seguis admitted.

"If I've given no cause for such an idea," Donald went on, fiercely, "what reason have you to come here and insult me with such a proposition as you've just offered?"

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In his shame over a proposal that in itself contained an accusation of disloyalty, the young man had thought only for himself. He gave no heed to the significance of the suggested plan in its bearing on the one who offered it. He failed altogether to appreciate the sacrifice that Charley Seguis stood ready to make. The half-breed was, in fact, as he had just declared, at the head of the organization that called itself the Brotherhood of Free-Traders. Now, from his own announcement, he was prepared to withdraw from the chief place, in order to make room for Captain McTavish. It might well be believed that the man had gratified his life's ambition in attaining such eminence among his fellow foes of the Company, yet he was willing to renounce his authority in favor of one whom he deemed worthy to supersede him. Here, surely, was a course of action that had no origin in selfishness, but sprang rather from some ideal of duty, rudely shaped, perhaps, but vital in its influence. . . . Yet, to all this, Donald gave no concern just now, even though at his question Seguis shrank as if from a physical blow.

Then, the half-breed straightened to the full of his height, and spoke with coldness in which was a hint of scorn under unjust accusation.

"I come to you, a prisoner and a burden on us," he said, bitterly. "I come with courteous words, and, in return, I get insults. In spite of your attitude, I'll give you another chance for your life. . . . Will you come into the brotherhood as its leader?"

The threatening phrase in the other's words had

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caught and held Donald's attention with sinister intentness.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "A chance for my life?"

The explanation was prompt, unequivocal.

"I mean that, if you don't accept this offer, your life isn't worth — that!" With the word, Seguis snapped under his heel a twig from the little fire. "Either you stay with us, and know everything — or you go from us, to die with the secret!" The voice was monotonous in its emotionless calm, but it was inexorable.

At the saying, a chill of fear fell on Donald, a fear formless at the first; then, swiftly, taking malignant, fatal shape. Out of memory leaped tales of terror, unbelieved, yet hideous. Now was born a new credulity, begotten of dread. His face whitened a little, and his eyes widened as he regarded the half-breed with growing alarm. His voice quavered, despite his will, when he put the question that was tormenting him:

"You don't mean that you'd send me on the — on the Death Trail?" he cried, aghast. The enormity of the peril swept over him in a flood, set him a-tremble. Though he questioned so wildly, he knew the truth, and the awfulness of it put his manhood in revolt, made him coward for the moment. The Death Trail! . . . He had not been prepared for that. To back against the wall, and fight to the end like a trapped animal were one thing — a thing

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for which he had been prepared. . . . But, the Death Trail — !

Suddenly, with the incongruity that is frequent in a highly wrought mind, his memory slipped back through the years to the time when first he heard of this half-mythical thing, which was called the Death Trail. He had run away from his nurse in Victoria Square, in Montreal, and, after his recapture, the girl had threatened him with the Death Trail as a punishment, should he ever repeat his offense. That night, he had questioned his father, the commissioner of the Company, as to this fearsome thing. . . . And the commissioner had merely laughed, unconcernedly.

"Oh, that, my boy!" he had exclaimed. "Why, that's an exploded yarn. Some people say the Company sent free-traders to their deaths that way. But who knows? Who can tell? I can't."

Then, the father had added some description as to the nature of this rumored Death Trail: how a man with a knife, but no gun; snowshoes, but no dogs; and not even a compass, was turned loose in the forest with a few days' food on his back, and told to save himself — how he wandered, starving and weakened day by day, until the terrible cold snuffed out his life, or he was pulled down by a roving wolf-pack.

And it was this fate that faced Donald now. . . . The words of the half-breed in answer to his question confirmed the dread suspicion.

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"So the council has decided," came the quiet statement, in reply to the prisoner's startled question. "We can't kill you outright. To do that would be more than flesh and blood — even Indian flesh and blood — could stand in your case, Captain McTavish. You've been our friend for three years. You have never harmed us. We've traded with you peaceably. But we can't keep you, and we can't let you return with our secret. All that's left is the Death Trail. It's the only way out for us. . . . It has been decided on."

"No — oh, no!" Donald cried imploringly, suddenly impassioned by the stark horror of this thing that stared at him out of the darkness. "No, I beg of you. Anything but that! Tell off a squad; take me out, and shoot me. . . . Or, better yet, let me fight for my life, somehow!"

Seguis shook his head in denial. There was commiseration in his steady glance, but there was no suggestion of yielding in his voice as he answered.

"For our own sakes, we can't," he explained concisely. "Any of those things would bring us to the gallows, and we can't afford that."

"Why should you care?" Donald retorted vindictively, with futile fierceness. "You're going to swing anyway, as soon as another man can get on your trail." He spoke with all the viciousness he could contrive, hoping by insults to arouse the fury of the half-breed, and thus provoke the fight for which he longed.

But the keen mind of Seguis detected instantly

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the ruse, and he merely smiled by way of answer, a smile that was half-pitiful, half-mocking.

"You might try suicide," he suggested, with an intent of kindness. "That way would spare the feelings of us all."

It was Donald's turn to shake his head in refusal now. As yet, such an action on his part appeared impossible to him. The love of life was too strong to permit the conceivability of such a choice. He was too much the fighter to confess defeat, and so lay down his life voluntarily. The McTavishes were not in the habit of giving up any struggle before it was fairly begun. . . . But the antagonism aroused in him by the suggestion steadied his nerves, restored him to some measure at least of his usual self-control.

"When do I go?" he asked. Face to face with the inevitable, a desolate calm fell upon him.

"To-morrow morning," Seguis replied, stolidly. Then, abruptly, the half-breed's manner softened, and he spoke in a different tone. "We're all disappointed, Captain McTavish, that you won't join us. We've been hoping for that — not for your death. And, perhaps, you don't quite understand, after all. We're starting this brotherhood honorably, with no malice toward any man. There's still hope for you, if you'll give your oath not to divulge what you've learned here, and not to follow me in this Cree Johnny affair. If you'll do that, we'll give you your belongings, and set you on your way, and —"

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Donald held up his hand, with a gesture of finality.

"You know I can't do that," he said, drearily. "Don't make it any harder for me. I understand your position now, in a way, and I suppose I'll have to take my medicine. But let me warn you." His tones grew menacing. "If I get out of this alive, though the chance that I shall isn't one in a thousand, you will pay the penalty for your crime."

The half-breed showed no trace of disturbance before the threat, but moved away toward the door.

"I'll take the risk of that," he said quietly; and he went out of the room.

Left to himself, Donald fell a prey to melancholy brooding for a few brief moments, then resolutely cast the mood off his spirit. He was little given to morbid reflections. Men whose lives are daily liable to forfeit rarely are. It was characteristic of him that, in this supreme hour of peril, his chief distress was over the injury wrought on the Company he served, for which he was about to lay down his life. If only he might send warning! If only, even in his last minutes of life, he might meet a friendly trapper, tell the great news, and send a messenger speeding north to Fort Severn, or east to Fort Dickey! That much accomplished, he could resign himself to die. . . . Such the loyalty and devotion that this grim, silent, far-reaching thing, the Company, breeds in its servants!

Of a sudden, another thought brought new bitterness to his soul, for, despite all the masterfulness of

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his loyalty to the Company, he was yet a man and a lover with a heart brimming over fondness for the one woman. Now, it came to him that, were he indeed to die somewhere out there in the wilderness, starved, frozen, alone, Jean would never know how his last act had been in the faithful following of her command. No, she could never know the truth concerning his fate. There was poignant torment in the thought. It might be months, years even, before his bleached, unrecognizable skeleton would be found somewhere in the remotest waste, with the bones of a wolf or two beside it, to indicate his desperate last stand.

With difficulty, McTavish shook off the evil thoughts that preyed upon him, and stretched his blankets and robes on the hard earth. Then, he cast more wood on his fire, and wrapped himself snugly, covering his head completely, Indian fashion, to prevent his face from freezing.

It was an hour before sleep came to him, and it seemed to him that he had scarcely dropped off when he felt himself shaken by the shoulder, and told to get up.

For a moment, Donald did not realize where he was, then the horrid truth rushed in upon him with sickening reality, and he sat up, blinking. His companion, he saw, was an Indian, who began to cook breakfast over the fire, upon which he had thrown more wood immediately after his entrance.

McTavish forced himself to eat heartily this last full meal he was, perhaps, ever to know. Then,

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obeying the guttural words of the Indian, he made his blankets into a pack, and unfalteringly followed outside.

There, the men were gathered around a dog-train, with two trappers, who, McTavish knew instinctively, were to be his companions for a distance into the wilderness. Throwing his blankets on the sledge, where he observed also a small pack of provisions, he climbed aboard.

Now, Charley Seguis appeared, and offered the Hudson Bay man a last chance. But Donald waved him aside, and requested that the start be made at once. Then, without a sound except the tinkling of the bells on the dogs' harness, the train got under way, and the last thing the Scotchman saw as he plunged into the woods was the silent group of men looking after him from in front of the big log house.

Straight north they took him, into the wildest country of all that desolation. Through forest aisles, beside great expanses of muskeg, over barren rock ridges, wound the unmarked trail. An army of caribou, drifting south in the distance, was all the life the doomed man saw in that long morning. Even the small live creatures seemed to have deserted this maddening region.

At noon, they camped for an hour, and then, with scarcely a word, took up the trail again. At last, when the darkness had begun to come, one of the Indians halted the dogs, and motioned McTavish off the sledge. While he was turning the dogs around, the other laid the victim's pack on the snow

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and presented two knives — the long, crooked hunter's knife, and the straight sheath-knife.

Then, with a grunt, they "mushed" the dogs on the back trail, and left the Hudson Bay man alone for his grapple with the wilderness.

For a time, he stood there dazed. Then, the realization of his doom rushed upon him, and, in mute desperation, he made a few swift steps after the departed sledge as though he would overtake it. But, in a moment, he recovered himself, and went back to where his pitiful belongings rested on the crusted snow. The stern resolve, the iron will that had made the McTavishes great, each in his generation, returned to him, and, without a word, he faced forward upon the Death Trail.

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CHAPTER VI

THE LAST STAND

MORNING found the world swathed in a great blanket of white. Snow that started as Donald made camp had fallen steadily through the dark hours, so that now rock and windfall and back trail were obliterated. Even the pines themselves were conical ghosts. As though he had been dropped from the skies, McTavish stood absolutely isolated in the trackless waste.

There was light upon the earth, but the leaden clouds diffused it evenly, so that he could not distinguish east from west, or south from north. If there had ever been a trail blazed here, the big snowflakes had long since hidden the notches in the bark.

Mechanically, the man reached into his pack for the compass he carried. A moment's search failed to reveal it, and he suddenly stood upright again, cut through with the knowledge that it had been taken from him.

How should he tell directions? How make progress except in fatal circles?

Looking up at the snowy pine-tops, he scrutinized them carefully. Their tips seemed to lean ever so slightly in one direction. Fearful lest his eyes had deceived him, he closed them for a few moments, and

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then looked again. The trees still leaned slightly to the right. He tried others, with the same result. Good! That was east! Ever in nature there is the unconscious longing for the life-giving sun, and it was in yearning toward its point of rising that the trees betrayed the secret. Here and there, tufts of shrub-growth pointed through the snow in one direction. That, he knew, should be south, and yet he must prove it. With his snowshoes, he dug busily at the base of a tree until he found the roots running into the iron ground. Circling the trunk, he at last found the growth of moss he was hunting. He compared it with the pointing tufts of shrub-growth, and found that his theory had been proven. For moss only grows on the shady side of trees, and in the far northland this is the north side, the sun rising almost directly in the south, except during the summer months.

With the north to the left, McTavish passed his pack-strap about his forehead, and started on the weary march. He knew that somewhere before him was Beaver Lake, and he remembered that there were two or three trappers along its shores. Just where they were, he could not specify, for his private map had been taken from him at the time his pack was made up. If they were loyal to the Company, he had a bare chance of reaching them; if, as he supposed, they belonged to the brotherhood — He did not finish out the thought. He was certain they were not loyal, else his exile would have been south instead of north.

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As he toiled along, foxes whisked from his path, their splendid brushes held straight behind them; snow-bunting and chattering whiskey-jacks scattered at his approach. Clever rabbits, their long ears laid flat, a dull gleam in their half-opened eyes, impersonated snow-covered stumps under a thicket of bristling shrubs.

With every hour, Donald thanked Providence that he had not heard the howl of a traveling wolf-pack, for a man well armed is no match for these ham-stringing villains once they catch him away from his fire, and a man with only two knives has his choice of starvation in a tree, or quick death under the gleaming fangs.

A little after noon, the wanderer reached a ravine, and stopped to make tea in its shelter. Above him, and leaning out at a precarious angle, a pine-tree, heavily coated with snow, seemed about to plunge downward from the weight of its white burden. Taking care to avoid the space beneath it, the man built his little fire, and boiled snow-water. He ate nothing now, having reduced his food to a living ration morning and evening. Having drunk the steaming stuff, he was about to return the tin cup to the pack when a rustling, sliding sound aroused him. He turned in time to see a great mass of snow from a tree higher up fall full upon the overloaded head of the protruding pine. The latter quivered for a moment under the impact, and then, with a loud snapping of branches and muffled tearing of roots,

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fell crashing to the crusted snow beneath, leaving a gaping wound in the earth.

McTavish looked with interest. Then, his jaw dropped, and his eyes widened in terror, for, bursting out of the hole, frothing with rage, came a huge bear, whose long winter nap had been thus rudely disturbed.

For an instant, blinded by the glare of the gray day, the creature stopped, rising on its hind legs and snarling fearfully. Donald, petrified with surprise, stood as though rooted to the ground. A moment later, the bear saw the man, and, without pause, started for him.

From an infuriated bear, there is but one means of escape — speed. In a flash, McTavish knew that he could outstrip the clumsy animal, for the latter would constantly break through the thin crust of the snow. But, in the same flash, he realized what escape would mean. His pack lay open. The hungry animal would rifle it completely, gulp down the priceless fat meat, and strew the rest of the provisions about. Then, the bear would go back to bed; the man would starve, and freeze to death in two or three days.

No! Running was out of the question.

Donald's doom had suddenly crystallized into a matter of minutes. To think with him was to act. Instantly, he drew his two knives, the long, keen hunter's blade in his right hand, the other in his left.

And, now, the bear was but twenty feet away,

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and coming on all-fours, its eyes gleaming wickedly, its mouth slavering. At ten feet, it suddenly rose on its hind legs, and then McTavish acted. With two swift, sliding steps forward on his snowshoes, his face was buried in the coarse fur of the animal's chest before the creature had fathomed the movement.

Then, the knives played wickedly. The long one in the right hand shot to the hilt in the heart; the one in the left went deep into the throat, and McTavish slipped downward before the great clasp — which would have broken his back — could close upon him. . . . Turning, he ran as he had never run before.

But there was little need. The bear, stricken in two vital spots, coughed hoarsely once or twice, spraying the clean snow scarlet, and dropped on all-fours. There, it swayed a moment, suddenly turned round and round swiftly, and fell motionless.

The victor approached cautiously. The animal was dead. The man withdrew his two knives, and, with all haste, skinned the animal in part, for now another danger presented itself. Although he had pushed starvation several days away, yet the smell of the kill would draw the wild folk, particularly the wolves. Quickly, he cut what he could safely carry of the choicest meat, and bestowed it in the pack, taking every precaution that no blood should drip along his trail. Then, he slipped the strap into place across his forehead, and sped eastward. . . . And now, instead of the dread companions — fear

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and starvation — that had dogged his footsteps, he ran hand in hand with hope.

Morning brought him out of the forest to the open prairie, fortunately a fairly level tract of land. This meant fast going, and McTavish, stronger than he had been for many hours past, on account of a hearty meal of bear meat, swung off across the crust at a kind of loping run. He did not walk now, but went forward on long, sliding strokes that would have kept a dog at a fast trot. Far, far in the distance, he saw the friendly shelter of woods, and, with eyes on the hard snow-crust beneath him, laid a course thither. Here on the prairie, the crust was the result of the soft Chinook west winds that came across the ranges, and melted the snow swiftly — only to let it freeze again into a sheathing of armor-plate.

To-day, the sun rose clear in a brilliant sky, and threw its oblique rays across the glaring snow-fields, so that they appeared to be of burnished glass. After awhile, Donald imagined that the colors of the rainbow were being mysteriously hurled down from heaven, for everywhere he looked he saw purple and green and yellow patches dancing against the white. He tried to follow them with his eyes, but they kept just to the right or the left of vision, so that he never got a fair look at them. Somehow, too, they blinded him, and presently he drew the hood over his face to shut out at least a part of the glare. But, since he was traveling fast, he soon became almost suffocated under the heavy envelope, and for relief was forced to throw aside the *capote,*

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and again expose himself to the blistering sunlight. . . . At noon, he could only just make out a very dim line in the distance, which told him where were the coveted trees of the forest. Although he was many miles nearer to them than he had been at dawn, they seemed farther away. The fact taught him beyond peradventure of doubt that something was wrong. Under a new urge of fear, he pressed forward without a moment of delay, save once for a tin cupful of tea. He realized the vital necessity of reaching the fringe of the wood by nightfall. Else, he would be exposed to the dangers of darkness on the open plains, without protection of any sort. The thought goaded him to desperate speed.

Now, black and purple and red patches joined the green and yellow and blue that had seared his eyeballs in the morning. Once, in making a careful detour around what he had thought to be a large bowlder, he was surprised to discover that, after all, it was only a small fragment of stone, over which he could very easily have stepped. Again, it was borne in on his consciousness that something was very wrong with him — seriously so!

By-and-by, the snow-drifts began to heave and run, like waves in a choppy sea, and Donald found himself staggering at every stride. Finally, to avoid falling, he was compelled to shut his eyes, for each glint from the snow was like the stab of a dagger through his brain. . . . He was snow-blind.

Yet, he must reach the wood. Within its shelter lay his sole hope of safety. So, he lurched forward

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with frenzied haste. The sun was sinking low to the horizon now. He knew, though he stumbled on with closed eyelids, for he could feel the rays on his cheek, which served him for compass to guide his steps toward the east. In such evil plight, with fatigue racking his body and anxiety rending his soul, he struggled toward his goal. Always, the pain in his eyes was a torture. Through it all, he kept listening eagerly for the sough of wind among branches. . . . For the time, he had forgotten that those branches were muted by their covering of snow.

Without any warning, Donald bumped full into a tree. The force of the impact on his weakened frame was such that he fell floundering on the snow. But, in an instant, he was up again, new hope surging in his breast, for, now, he knew that he had indeed reached the edge of the forest. Using the sense of touch to save him from other collisions, he proceeded cautiously among the trees for a half-mile or more, and then, at last, pitched his pitiful camp. Sightless, he managed somehow, albeit very clumsily, to hack some fragments of bark from the bole of the tree beneath which he had come to a halt, and with these he made a fire, and heated the snow-water for his tea. When he had completed his scanty meal, he made a poultice for his eyes from the tea-leaves, and bound it in place. Then, swathed in his blankets, he endured as best he might a night of anguish. No sleep came to his assuaging. His brain was a chaos in which countless suns and planets swirled madly,

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rushing to countless explosions of torment. In those hours, he suffered an eternity, for back of material agony was a spirit's despair.

In a momentary lull of pain, Donald became aware that the sun was again risen after the ages of night, for he felt on the back of his hand, which he experimentally exposed, the hot-and-cold mottling from the rays. The renewed opportunity for action after the passive misery of the night heartened him for a brief interval, and he bestirred himself eagerly with preparations for the day. First of all, he must have chips of bark for a fire, in order to make ready his breakfast. He had already, the night before, exhausted the supply within reach on the tree at hand, so another source of supply must be sought. Forthwith, on hands and knees, with bared knife in his clutch, he crawled blindly until he found another tree. Circling about it, with swift strokes of the knife, he quickly had an ample store of fuel for his need. Gathering this up, he started back. . . .

Walking forward falteringly, with the little load of bark held to his breast, Donald realized in a shock of alarm that he must have passed beyond the tree at the foot of which his pack was lying. In panic anxiety, he forced his lids apart, and strove to compel sight. It was in vain. A prismatic blur reeled before him. He could not distinguish sky from snow, or sun from tree. Only, the pain suddenly leaped with new life and flooded the useless eyeballs with stinging tears. The futility of his effort sickened the man. But, by a mighty exercise of will, he

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thrust down his emotion, and set himself doggedly to the task of finding a way back. To this end, he knelt down, and felt the smooth surface of the snow with bare fingers for some trace of his footsteps. There was none. The firm crust had carried him without strain. There was no least abrasion of the frozen surface to afford him a clew to his own trail. He strove to reason concerning the direction of his movements, but quickly abandoned the attempt as altogether baffling. In his circling about the tree from which he had garnered fuel, he had neglected to hold his bearings in relation to the camp. In setting off on his return, he might have moved in any one of the three hundred and sixty degrees of the circle. For that matter, he could not now even find his way back to the tree from which he had got the chips. Despite his brave resolve, the afflicted man found himself powerless then to devise any scheme of action to be pursued. In this inability, he left himself exposed to utter despair, and, for the first time in all his grisly journey, such despair took him for its own. Like a monster that had been hungrily awaiting its opportunity with growing fierceness, it now clutched him by the throat, shook him, held him helpless in a gigantic terror. Where could he go? What could he do? How could he find — anything — ever? . . . His teeth were chattering — not from the cold.

And, now, since hope was fled at last, a prophecy of the end voiced itself in the pangs of hunger, which bit like poison within him. The demon of starva-

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tion leaped upon him, gloating, gluttonous of the end.

Yet, after an interval of infinite wretchedness, Donald recalled his vigors, and shook off the lethargy that had bound his spirit. Once again, he rallied the strength of his manhood, and set his will to the hopeless strife. Blind, starving, he still gave battle to the North.

So, after a weary while, the shuddering panic left him, and he set to work with renewed calm. Following the single method that offered any possibility of success in his quest for the camp, he spent exhausting hours in plodding hither and yon through the mazes of the wood, guiding his courses in what he vainly believed to be concentric circles, endeavoring by this means to come on the tree under which he had left his pack, through a process of elimination. Smaller and smaller the circle grew, until in the end, he found himself turning about on one spot in the snow. Despite this initial failure, he repeated the maneuver bravely, only to have his toil culminate in a second failure. A third effort was equally futile. Worn by hunger and fatigue, and by the racking emotions of the situation, his spirit weakened again, so that he sat on his haunches in a huddled posture of wo, and sobbed like a child in desperation and self-pity.

Still, though fearfully bruised by the blows of fate, the spirit of the man was not broken. Into his consciousness, presently, came the realization that he

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must not waste another instant of time in trying to find the pack. To stay where he was until the blindness should leave him would be to court death by starvation; to go on would offer at least the remote possibility of encountering some wandering trapper — though the probability would be of a swifter ending from the wolves. But the unvarying rule of the trapper is to go forward — always forward, whatever be the cost. That rule was in Donald's mind now, and it spurred him to vehement obedience. . . . Forward — always forward! With the awkward movements of the newly blind, he got slowly to his feet, and went shambling onward.

And, now, the mood of abject depression in the face of catastrophe was thrust out, never to return, whatever the issue. Fear was swallowed up by fierce effort and fiercer resolve. All the strength of will in the man was concentrated in an iron determination that was steadfast, unflinching, as hour followed hour in the sickening toil of a vague progress. The blood of his ancestors was at work in Donald, driving him on remorselessly. Even more than that, the strong man's instinctive love of life, the gut-string tenacity that makes him fight off death until the last horrible second, welled high in his heart, surged wildly in his blood, compelling him on and on — ever on!

The afflicted man needed such scourging of impulse. And the scourging might well have failed, had he known all the ghastly truth as to how sorely he was beset. Had sight been granted to him again

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for a minute, he might have turned readily to the expedient suggested by the half-breed, which he had rejected so firmly — might have drawn the keen blade of the knife across his own throat. . . . For, stealthily picking their way along the back trail toward Lake Sturgeon, two Indians went swiftly, and they bore with them, divided equally between them, the contents of the lost man's pack. From the moment of Donald's setting forth, these two had followed him, in order to make certain of his death. Last night, they had ventured to camp close to him, since to their eyes of experience it was made plain by his actions that he was blind. In the morning, when he lost his way, they had stolen his belongings, thereby to insure the end. Then, wearied of their long vigil, they took the homeward trail with glad hearts. They knew beyond any shadow of questioning that death to the wanderer could be only a matter of a few hours now. They could safely report to the council of the brotherhood that the condemned had followed Death Trail to its end.

Mercifully, Donald guessed nothing of all this. So, he held to his slow course eastward with a stolidly patient courage against every obstacle. Very often, he verified his direction by feeling the shoots of the shrubbery, or by the more laborious digging to the moss that grew at the foot of the tree-trunks. Always, the cold assaulted him, and as time passed and hunger waxed, its attacks were more difficult to resist. The draining of his energies left him unprotected against the piercing chill of the air. Frequently, he

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was forced to halt, in order that he might gather chips for a fire, and then crouch, shivering over the blaze for a time ere he dared resume his march. Indeed, as the night drew down on him, he felt himself so enfeebled, so sensitive to the icy wind, that he feared to sleep, lest he might never wake. So, for his life's sake, he kept moving, now by sheer stress of will-power lashing the spent muscles to movement. From time to time, with ever shortening intervals, he stopped to make a little fire, over which he huddled drowsily, but with his will set firm against a moment's yielding to that longing for a sleep which, of necessity, must merge into one from which there could be no awakening. . . . In such manful wise, Donald battled with death through the dragging hours.

When he felt the coming of the sun next morning, the follower of the Death Trail was minded to count his remaining store of matches. There were just a score of them. It seemed, then, that, after all, the end would come not from starvation, but from freezing, for against the deadly cold he could summon his ally of fire only twenty times, and without that ally his surrender must be swift. Therefore, as he went forward now, he endured the sufferings inflicted by the icy blasts to new limits, jealously hoarding his meager supply of matches — which had come to be his milestones as he drew near the end of Death Trail. . . . Donald gave over the reckoning of time then. He recked nought of minutes or hours, nought of day or of night. Subconsciously, he still

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paused often to make sure that the east lay straight before him; but the activities of his mind now were become focused on the ceaseless counting of the matches that measured his span of life. And, as one after another served his need of warmth in the kindling of a fire, so his high courage dwindled steadily, until, when but a single splinter of the precious wood was left him, he gave over the last pretense of bravery, and shook cowardly in the clutch of fear. He continued a staggering advance for a long time, but hope was fled. The desire for food was not so mordant now. In its stead, a raging thirst tortured tongue and throat. He resisted a frantic craving to devour the snow, since he knew well that this would but multiply his torments. Yet, fatigue and thirst and even the stabbing cold, which would at last be his executioner, were not the things that swayed his emotions in these final stages of the Death Trail. Somehow, the matches had come to be his obsession. His physical agony was felt through a blessed medium of apathy now; it was become something curiously remote, almost impersonal. Always, his consciousness was filled with a morbid counting of the matches, the measure of his life. So, when there was only the one, he felt that the end was, indeed, come upon him. He strove his mightiest, but his might was shrunken to a puny sham. He struggled forward valiantly, but his advance was like the progress of a snail. Then, suddenly, another step became an infinite labor — something of which he could not even think. He lurched forward, and fell against a

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tree-trunk. The concussion aroused him to a clearer understanding. Very slowly, with a dreadful clumsiness of movement, he hacked off fragments of the bark within his reach, piled them in readiness, struck the match, and set it to the loose fibers. It never occurred to him that this last match might fail. And it did not. Its tiny flame grew in seconds to a cheery, crackling blaze. Donald, on his knees, with hands outspread like a worshiper in adoration before his god — as in truth he was! — felt the penetrant vibrations of the fire with an inexpressible languor of bliss. This was the last match — the end! But what matter? The lethargy of utter exhaustion dulled familiar suffering. The obsession of the match still held its mastery, and its expression was the hot flame that breathed on him. Donald had no thought of death now, though vaguely he knew that he was prone at the feet of death. It mattered not. Nothing mattered any more — nothing save this luxury of warmth that was shed upon him from the last match; this luxury of warmth, and that other luxury of sleep, which stole upon him now so softly, so caressingly.

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CHAPTER VII

JEAN PUTS IT UP TO HER FATHER

JEAN FITZPATRICK rose from the breakfast-table at Fort Severn, and asked for the Winnipeg papers. Three days before, the mail-carrier had dashed in with dogs on the gallop, and ever since the white folk at the fort had been having a riot of joy. Months-old letters from almost forgotten friends, and papers many weeks behind their dates had been perused over and over again, until they could almost be recited from memory.

Tongues wagged in gossip over personages perhaps dead by this time, and sage opinions settled questions that had long since passed from the minds of men in the glamourous cities of far-off civilization.

Jean passed from the dining-room into the drawing-room, where many days before she had sent Donald McTavish from her presence. Her father, who had eaten earlier, had retired into his private study, pleading business matters of urgency, and the girl settled herself luxuriously near a square, snow-edged window, with a pile of newspapers beside her easy chair.

She had not been reading long when voices raised

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in argument at the front door distracted her attention.

"No," the servant of the house was saying, "you can't see the factor. He has given orders that he cannot be disturbed."

"But I must see him!" replied a croaking voice, using the Ojibway dialect. "I have come many miles to see him, and must go away to-day."

"Who are you?" asked Butts, the British butler, who served the factor's table with all the ceremony to be found in an English manor.

"Maria."

"Maria who?"

"Just Maria. I don't need any other name."

"Tell me your message, and I'll give it to him. Then, you can come around later in the day for your answer."

"No, I can't do that. This is something I must say to him myself, and in private," croaked the voice.

"Well, you can't see him, and that's all there is about it," snapped Butts with finality, and he slammed the door full in the old Indian woman's face.

At that, Jean sprang up and hurried from the drawing-room into the hallway, her eyes flashing with resentment.

"Here, Butts," she said sharply, "call that woman back, and bring her to me in the sitting-room. I will hear what she has to say, if she will tell me."

"Yes, miss," and the butler, showing vast disapproval in his tone, opened the door.

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A minute later, Jean looked up to see a bent, wizened old hag standing in the doorway, bobbing respectfully.

"Come in close to the fire. You must be cold," suggested the girl kindly, noting the pinched brown features. "Then I will talk to you."

A leer of thanks and gratitude spread over the ugly, wrinkled face, and the creature acted on the suggestion.

"Can't you wait to see my father until later?" asked Jean.

"No, I go with my son to the hunting-grounds this afternoon," the woman answered.

"Well, if you will tell your message to me, I will see that he gets it."

The squaw made no reply, but searched Jean's face with her bright little eyes. Then, she said suddenly:

"So, you're the one he is in love with?" The girl, taken aback, bristled at the words and tone.

"To whom do you refer?" she asked.

"Captain McTavish. Ha, you start and blush! Then, there are two sides of the matter. It's a pity! It's a pity!"

Jean, now thoroughly angered, both by the woman's temerity and her own involuntary coloring at the mention of Donald McTavish's name, turned on her visitor sharply.

"You will kindly keep to the matter that brought you here, Maria," she said, "and leave both myself and Captain McTavish out of it."

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"I can leave you out of it, but not McTavish," was the stolid reply.

"What do you mean?"

"Ha, ha! That's it. What do I mean? Sometimes I hardly know myself, but at others it comes back to me clearly enough. But I warn you, pretty miss," and the squaw suddenly pointed a shaking finger at the girl. "Never marry him, this McTavish. Never marry him!"

"I haven't the slightest intention of doing so," returned the girl coldly; "but I would like to know why you say what you do, and why you wanted to see my father and tell him all this nonsense."

"Nonsense, you say!" The old woman chuckled. "No, it ain't nonsense. Your father knows something already, but probably he won't tell you; such things aren't for the ears of young girls, particularly when they blush and grow angry at the mention of a man. But he'll marry you if he can, stain or no stain. That's a man's way."

Jean Fitzpatrick's hands wandered to her throat as though to ease her dress. Her eyes were wide with wonder and her fear of something half-hinted, and the color had gone out of her face. Here they were again, these rumors that had disturbed her mind from time to time. But, now, they were almost definite — and they were not pleasant!

And her father knew! She had suspected the fact, and yet he had not told her anything, even denying his knowledge when forced to the point.

What was it, this thing that was the prized prop-

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erty of a glittering-eyed Indian hag? She dared hear no more from the crafty, insinuating creature. She would go to her father himself, and find out. She turned to the old woman, who was watching her closely.

"Maria," she said, "I will do what I can to have my father see you before you leave this afternoon. If he will not, then you may know that everything possible has been done. If he will see you, I'll send a boy to find you."

The squaw knew enough of white etiquette to realize that this was a dismissal, and started toward the door.

"He knows, he knows!" she croaked. "Tell him this time that there is money in it, and, if he won't see me now, I'll be back in the spring."

She went out, leaving Jean bewildered and spent with emotion, trying to collect her scattered thoughts. Knowing that her father was busy, she returned to the papers, and tried to read. But the words passed in front of her eyes without meaning, and, after fifteen minutes of this, she rose determinedly.

The knock on her father's study door elicited a growl of inquiry, and she went in without answering. Old Angus Fitzpatrick sat bent over his desk writing, his white beard sweeping the polished wood. He wore large horn spectacles.

"Father," began the girl, coming straight to the point, "do you know an old Ojibway squaw by the name of Maria?"

Neither the bulk of the man nor his stolidity could

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hide the involuntary start the words gave him. He looked searchingly at his daughter from beneath his beetling brows.

"Yes, I have seen her, I think," he replied cautiously after a moment. "Why?"

"She came here to-day, and insisted, almost violently, on seeing you. Butts was about to send her away when I interfered and talked to her myself. I don't like her; she frightens me."

"You talked with her?" asked the factor hastily, his agitation undisguised this time.

"Yes, but I couldn't learn anything definite. She has a lot of nasty rumors in her head. Maybe they're facts, but she only spoke in hints. She said the facts she would tell only to you."

Angus Fitzpatrick heaved an inaudible sigh of relief. The old squaw, then, had been discreet.

"What was the subject of her conversation?" he asked, sharply.

The girl hesitated and flushed.

"Horrid hints regarding Don — Captain McTavish," she said, finally. Then, her indignation rising once more, she went on swiftly: "Just the sort of thing I have heard from you, from Tee-ka-mee, from every one who has a right or privilege to mention such things. Now, father, I have come in here to find out just what this thing is. You can tell me in five minutes, if you will. Ah, yes, you can," she insisted, as the factor started to deny. "Yes, you can; old Maria said so, and I believe her. "After last summer when he was here, and I —

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when I grew to be very fond of his company, you suddenly began putting things into my mind, uncertain hints, slurring intimations, significant gestures — all the things that can damage a character without positively defaming it. Something had happened! Something had come to your notice that made you do all that. You never liked Donald, but you didn't really oppose him before that time. Now, I want to know what this is." Her voice hardened. "I'm tired of being treated like a schoolgirl; I'm twenty-four, and old enough to think for myself, and I demand to know what mystery has forced a black shadow between us."

She stopped, breathless, the color going and coming in her cheeks like the ebb and flow of northern lights in the sky.

Old Angus Fitzpatrick, amazed at the vehemence of his usually passive daughter, had risen to his feet. To make him furious, it was only necessary to demand something. This the girl, in excellent imitation of his own manner, had done, and he resented it highly, glaring at her through his spectacles.

"Do you mean to stand there and say that you demand that I tell you something?" he roared. "Well, I refuse, that's all."

And he turned angrily away from her. The girl mastered herself, and asked in a cold, even voice:

"Will you tell me this? Is there anything definite against Donald McTavish?"

"Do you demand to know?"

"No, I ask it."

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"Well, then, there is. A perfectly good reason why you can never marry him."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you. And, if I can't, no one else can. Respect him all you will for himself, but don't love him. I tell you this to spare you pain later. And, if you please, Jean," he added more gently as his temper went down, "never let us speak of this painful subject again."

"Very well, father," she replied, calmly. "Oh, by the way, do you wish to see that woman? She leaves this afternoon."

"No, I never want to see her again."

"She said for me to tell you there was money in it this time," added the girl, a slight note of contempt in her tone.

The factor hesitated.

"No," he said finally; and, without another word, Jean left the room.

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CHAPTER VIII

THE ALARM

DARKNESS had just fallen over the snow-enshrouded fort. Three hours ago, Maria, with her stoical Indian son, had pulled out behind a dog-train with fresh supplies. The old squaw had been balked in her attempt to see the factor. Since she had not been sent for, she did not dare try to force another entrance.

Angus Fitzpatrick and his daughters, Laura and Jean, were having tea in the drawing-room; preparations were under way for dinner in the kitchen. Outside, a couple of huskies got into a fight, the bell of the chapel rang for mid-week even-song, a couple of Indians called in Ojibway to each other across the snowy expanse of the courtyard.

Suddenly, from somewhere out on the frozen Severn, there came faint yells, followed by the staccato of revolver and rifle shots. Just as suddenly, all the life in the factory came to a dead stop, as everyone listened for more shots by which to make sure of the direction. Three minutes later, the additional reports sounded sharply.

With lightning speed, snowshoes were strapped on, rifles and cartridge-belts gathered up, and, almost

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in less time than it takes to tell, twenty men were racing across the ice to help.

It was the familiar winter's tragedy near the fort — a man traveling fast and nearing his destination at nightfall. Perhaps, he had five miles to go for food, warmth, light, and companionship. He took the risk, and pressed on in the dark. And, then, the wolf-pack, that had been dogging him over many leagues, closed in for the kill, since the lone man's one security is his fire.

"When will these Indians learn that lesson?" asked the factor irritably, sipping his tea. The shots had reached his ears, and the swift departure of the rescuers had been heard from the courtyard.

It was, perhaps, an hour later when a tramping of feet and chorus of voices announced the return of the men. As there was no sad procession, it was evident that the trapper had been saved. Presently, Butts entered the lamplit room.

"The trapper they just rescued is asking to see you, sir," he said. "Claims his message to be most important, sir, 'e does."

"Life and death?"

"Might as well say so, sir, from the way he carries on."

"Show him in."

Five minutes later, Cardepie, the Frenchman from Fort Dickey, stood in the presence of the factor's family, vastly embarrassed, but bursting with news.

"Ah, by gar!" he cried when permission to speak had been given; "dere is gran' trouble in de distric'.

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Everywhere, de trapper is gone away — everywhere de shanty is desert'. B-gosh! For sure, dere is somet'ing wrong! One, two, ten, dirteen days ago, dat brave Captain McTavish go on de long trail for Charley Seguis, an' have not been heard of since. *Diable!* Perhaps, he no find heem in dat time; anyway, he sen' word to de fort. But dis time? *Non!* We haf no word, an' by gar! I know somet'ing wrong.

"I call my dogs, Ba'tiste an' Pierre an' Raoul an' Saint Jean, an' pack de sleigh. I cannot stan' my brother lost, so I go after heem. *Bien donc!* I hunt de distric' careful, but I fin' not wan track of heem. I go to trapper shanty one after de other. Peter Rainy, he gone four days before me, but I not even see heem. *Tonnerre, sacré!* De hair stan' on my head wit' fear of somet'ing I do not know. Mebbe wan beeg *loup-garou* eat every man in de distric', an' have his eye on me.

"I go into a shanty, an' fin' paper not burn' in stove just wan end. I pick it up; I read de English good, like I talk. McTavish teach me dat on long nights. B-gosh! *m'sieur,* I read dat fas', once, twice. Den I go out, an' jump into de sleigh, an' point Ba'tiste's nose to Fort Severn. *Pauvre* Saint Jean, he die I run heem so hard, an' now I got only t'ree dogs."

"Stop! Stop!" yelled the factor at the top of his voice, interrupting with difficulty the tumbling cascade of Cardepie's speech. "Have you that paper with you?"

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"*Oui,* by gar!" cried the Frenchman proudly, digging into his fur coat, and finally producing a half-sheet of rough paper, charred at the upper edge.

Fitzpatrick puzzled over it for a full minute. Then, his eyes began to bulge, and the veins in his neck to swell as he read aloud:

The brotherhood meets in five days at Sturgeon Lake. Bring your early furs to the post there.

SEGUIS, Chief Free-Trader.

"Free-traders! Free-traders!" he gasped. "By heaven, this is too much! For thirty years, I have been factor in this district, and kept the hunters in line. But, now, there's a brotherhood of free-traders. They'll flout the Company, will they? They'll flout me, eh? I'll show them, by heaven! I'll show them!"

The factor heaved himself out of his chair, and lumbered excitedly up and down the room.

"And Seguis is at the head of it. I wonder where that man, McTavish, is? If he has done his duty, that sneaking half-breed is either dead or tied to a sledge on his way here. That'll break 'em up quick enough — taking their leader! It's up to him, now. . . . Cardepie, send the chief trader of the fort and the doctor to me, at once. We'll have to organize to meet this situation."

The Frenchman, frightened at the anger of the fierce old man, was glad enough to make his escape. Fitzpatrick turned to his daughters.

"Girls, please have your dinners brought upstairs

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to you to-night. I want to talk business with my chiefs at the table."

Obediently, the two young women rose and left the room, glad, in their turn, to avoid the tantrum of the irate factor.

Morning found Fort Severn in a tumult of excitement. The news of the free-trading organization had spread until even the dullest Indian had been made aware of it.

The council of department heads, at dinner the night before, had unanimously decided that but one course lay open to them — to crush the rebellion against the Company before it could reach any larger proportions. At the same time, it was agreed that a wait of a few days would be judicious, for in that time McTavish might come in with Charley Seguis as his prisoner.

No one doubted for a moment that, if McTavish came at all, it would be either to announce the death of the man he had set out to capture, or to hand his prisoner over to the authorities. Such was Donald's reputation in the district.

Nevertheless, all necessary preparations for a military expedition were made. Storekeeper Trent drew liberally on his supplies, and kept his helpers busy making up packs for traveling. Also, he opened cases of cartridges, that he might serve them out to the men on a moment's notice. Sledges were overhauled and repaired.

About noon of the third day, a dog-train and sledge, with one man walking beside it, were sighted

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far across the frozen Severn, headed toward the fort. Half an hour later, a man stationed in one of the bastions with a field-glass announced that a second man lay on the sledge.

"That settles it," said he. "It's McTavish bringing in Charley Seguis."

A sigh of relief went up, for all knew their task would now be easier. After another space, however, the man with the glass began to focus industriously and mutter to himself.

"That's not McTavish walking at all!" he suddenly cried. "It's an Indian." And five minutes later: "By heaven! That's McTavish on the sleigh."

Thus did the fort first know of the happening to the captain of Fort Dickey. When the dogs, with a final burst of speed and music of bells, swept through the tunneled snow of the main gate, the whole settlement gathered around curiously.

With a wry grin, McTavish rose from the furs that wrapped him, and, with a wave of his hand, but no word, started directly for the factor's house. One hand was bound in strips of fur and a fold of his *capote* shielded his eyes from the glare. He was beginning to see again, however, and went straight toward his object, turning aside all questions with a shake of his head.

Not so with Peter Rainy. The center of an admiring and curious group, he narrated his adventures with many a flourish and exaggeration. Reduced to a few words, the facts were these:

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When McTavish had refused to take his old servant on the hunt for Charley Seguis, Rainy had moped disconsolate for almost a week. It was the first time they had ever been separated on a dog or canoe journey. At the end of that period, when no runner had brought word of his master, the Indian became restless and anxious.

Finally, having nothing himself, he had mended an old sleigh at the fort, borrowed Buller's dog-team, and set out to locate McTavish, against the desire and advice of Cardepie and Buller.

How he had followed the blind trail, how he had escaped capture at Lake Sturgeon by a hair's breadth and a snowfall that obliterated his tracks, and how he had, finally, in despair, started for Fort Severn for help, took long in the telling.

But the same snowfall that saved him, saved McTavish, for, in taking a cut through the woods, Rainy had come upon the erratic tracks of the blind man, and followed them without the slightest suspicion of whose they were, only knowing that someone was in distress.

The meeting between man and master, just barely in time to save the latter's life, had been fervent, but reserved. McTavish gave himself up to the ministrations of the other like a child, and obediently rode almost all the way to the fort on the sledge, his eyes covered. Food there had been in plenty, so that, by the time the snowy masses of Fort Severn showed themselves, he had regained nearly all his strength.

But, while Peter Rainy was satisfying curious ears

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outside, a far different scene was taking place in the factor's private office. Donald, the covering removed from his eyes in the darkened room, faced Angus Fitzpatrick across the latter's desk, and briefly told the story of his adventures.

When he had finished the account, there was silence in the room for a minute. Fitzpatrick scowled. Something about this young man, even his presence itself, seemed to irritate him.

"Where is the man you went out to get, McTavish?" asked the factor.

"At Sturgeon Lake."

"He ought to be here in jail."

"I know it, sir. I did the best I could."

"The Hudson Bay Company doesn't take that for an excuse. It wants the man. This is a hard country and a hard rule, but no other rule will keep a respect for law in our territories. A shot, a dagger-thrust, anything to punish Seguis for his crime, and this ruffianly collection of free-traders would have disbanded, leaderless."

"But," expostulated McTavish, "surely you do not counsel murder as a punishment for murder."

"I counsel measures to fit needs. In this vast desolation, I am the law; I represent the inevitable result of a cause, the inexorable, never-failing punishment of a wrong. As my lieutenant, you also represent it. Charley Seguis should either be dead or a prisoner here."

Donald did not answer. Theoretically, the factor was right; according to all the traditions of the Com-

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pany, he spoke the truth. But he had evidently forgotten that even the Company he worshiped was made up of men, who were human and not omnipotent. Carried too far, his premises were unjust, ridiculous, and untenable. But of what good were arguments?

"Then, I have failed in my duty?" McTavish asked, wearily.

"Judge for yourself."

"What are your next orders for me?"

"A hundred dollars fine and a month's confinement in the fort here."

McTavish shrank back as though a blow had been aimed at him.

"You can't mean it, Mr. Fitzpatrick," he cried, passionately. "I have earned no such disgrace. Command anything but that; send me to the ends of the district; let me go back to Sturgeon Lake, and throw my life away there, if you must have it; send me to the loneliest trading-post in Keewatin, but don't disgrace me needlessly, unjustly."

"I can only do what my conscience dictates," said the factor coldly.

"Well, all I can say is, that, if heaven has a conscience like yours, God help you when you die, Mr. Fitzpatrick."

The factor touched a bell, and, an instant later Tee-ka-mee stepped noiselessly into the room.

"Take Mr. McTavish to his room in the old barracks," Fitzpatrick directed. "And, by the way,

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please ask Miss Jean to come here a moment. I wish to speak with her."

At the innocent request, Tee-ka-mee almost fell to the floor with terror.

"What's the matter with you, you demon?" growled the factor. "Have you been drinking again?"

"No, no, no," cried the Indian, hastily. "I am afraid — I must tell you — Miss Jean — Oh, what can I say?"

"In heaven's name, what's the matter? What's this about Miss Jean?" shouted the factor.

"She is gone, sir, disappeared completely!" cried the frightened Indian. "Her serving-woman has been searching for hours. She went tobogganing out behind the fort at ten o'clock, with the missionary's wife. Mrs. Gates came in at noon, but Miss Jean said she would slide once or twice more, alone. She hasn't come in, and we can find no trace of her."

"Why wasn't I told of this?" cried the factor, in a weak, pitiful voice.

"We didn't want to alarm you unnecessarily, sir," said Tee-ka-mee.

"Oh, get out of here! Leave me alone," groaned Fitzpatrick; and the two men quietly went out, and closed the door on the old man's grief.

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CHAPTER IX

THE BROKEN PIPE

FOR nearly the whole night, Donald McTavish had paced the bare little room that had been set aside for him. Now, he looked at his watch. It was four o'clock.

The thought occurred to him that he ought to get some rest, but immediately his common sense told him that for twenty-five days more he would have nothing to do but rest, and, spurred on by the witches that rode his racing mind, he continued his animal-like pacing. Up one side, across past the foot of the bed; back again and down; that was his route. And, while his feet traversed but seven or eight yards, his mind was speeding across all the leagueless spaces of the Northland.

Where was she? Where was she? This was the continual refrain that rang in his ears. For five days now, Jean Fitzpatrick had been gone; swallowed up in the silent, snowy wastes. Who had taken her? Why? And whither?

When Tee-ka-mee's announcement spread through the post, fifty men had rushed out to the search, cursing, sobbing, or praying, each according to his own temperament; for nowhere in all the Northland was a girl more beloved than was Jean Fitzpatrick. Sum-

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mer and winter, the days were full of little kindnesses of hers, so that her disappearance was not a signal for a "duty" search, but one in which every man worked as though he alone had been to blame for her loss.

Her toboggan had been found at the top of the hill where she and Mrs. Gates had spent the morning, and on the hard crust a few dim tracks could be seen leading into the forest, with now and then a dent where, perhaps, the girl's snowshoe had gone through. But aside from these unsatisfying clews not a trace of her could be located.

For two days, the searchers took every trail, traveling light and running swiftly, but to no avail. The girl had disappeared as though evaporated by the sun.

Then did old Angus Fitzpatrick, bowed with grief, summon his council and deliberate as to the affairs at Sturgeon Lake. Stern old disciplinarian with others, he was none the less so with himself in his dark hour, and even begrudged the two days of the Company's time that he had used in the search for Jean.

Unanimously against him stood the entire council when he mentioned the free-traders, and suggested that they be run to earth. His chiefs of departments almost refused to embark on any project until the factor's daughter should be found. But old Fitzpatrick with the autocracy of thirty years in the Far North, snarled their sentiments down with his own, and forced them to the Company's business in hand.

And so it was at last decided that almost the en-

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tire force of men, well-armed and well-provisioned, should take the trail for Sturgeon Lake, led by the factor himself. Vainly, his lieutenants begged the white-haired chief to remain in the comparative safety and comfort of the fort. Declaring that this was the only trouble in all his years in the North, and that he would put it down himself, Fitzpatrick remained inexorable.

"Besides," he added pathetically, "if anything should be heard from Jean, I would be there to follow it up."

All this Donald heard from Peter Rainy and his guards, as he sat chafing in his little room. During the excitement, the captain of Fort Dickey and his miraculous escape from death never entered the minds of the community. Had it not been for Peter Rainy and the guard, he would have fared ill indeed.

The morning of the fourth day was hardest of all. Then, the fifty men, with many dogs, sledges, and packs, tinkled out from the fort across the icy river, sped on their way by the waving hands of women, old men, and the furious few selected by lot to remain and keep the big fort.

That same day, Peter Rainy, under strict orders from the factor, who had at last recollected his prisoner, hitched up Buller's dogs, and departed for Fort Dickey. Before he went, he had only a minute's speech with McTavish, saying something at which the Scotchman shook his head violently, and scowled with anger. Then, the guard came, and the interview was at an end.

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Now, on this dark morning, dismal thoughts marched through Donald's mind. But what chafed him most was his forced inaction. For twenty-five days more, he must sit in that pestilential prison while all about him events of great moment were being lived, and the girl he loved was perhaps dying in the merciless hands of her father's enemies.

And, then, there was temptation because of something, barely understood, that Rainy had mumbled.

"Break your pipe, and ask for the one in the hallway," he had said.

This enigmatic remark should be explained. For years, the factor at Fort Severn had kept in his hallway an enormous pipe-rack. Here, in appropriate rings were souvenir pipes from every white man that had ever visited the post. Most prized of all was one that had belonged to the great governor of the Company, Sir George Simpson, who yearly traveled thousands of miles in regal state, with red banners floating from his canoes, and a matchless crew of Iroquois paddlers whose traditional feats are unbroken even to this day.

There were pipes of all the governors and all the factors of the post from its earliest foundation. Many of the men whose souvenirs were there had long since been forgotten, yet their names and pipes still remained.

In the fifth row, seventh from the left, hung a splendid briar that Donald had contributed, and it was to this that Peter Rainy had referred, since there was a rule that a man might borrow his pipe

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if he needed it, but must be sure to have it returned to its proper place.

Why should he break his pipe, and ask for the one in the hallway? That in his pocket was sweet and rich and mellow, the one in the hall an unsmoked instrument, which would keep his tongue blistered for many a day. But how to get it, even should he want it? That was a question he could not solve.

After a while, the prisoner, worn out with his long tramp, lay down on his cot, and fell into a heavy sleep, from which he was awakened by the old Indian, who came to bring him his breakfast. With the latter came a message utterly disconcerting.

"Captain McTavish," said the man, "there will be someone here to visit you later this morning."

"Who?"

"Miss Laura Fitzpatrick."

Donald gasped.

"What have I done to deserve this punishment?" he asked himself. And then, aloud: "Why is she coming to see me?"

"I don't know," was the answer; "she merely told me to tell you."

When the expedition departed to Sturgeon Lake, but two white women had been left — Mrs. Gates, the missionary's wife, and Laura Fitzpatrick. The latter, a maiden upward of thirty-five, had decided to remain in solitary glory as mistress of the factor's house, feeling amply protected by the few white men left at the post.

The captive had reasons for not desiring this visit,

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outside of the possible impropriety. The summer before, during his happy weeks in Jean's company, circumstances often shaped themselves so that there were three persons on their little canoe trips and picnics — and the third was Miss Fitzpatrick. Her ingenuity in these matters had been positively remarkable. And the entire post had grinned up its sleeve, knowing old Fitzpatrick's declaration that Jean should not marry until Laura had been taken off his hands.

For the first time in her life, Laura had evinced an interest in the *genus* man. Consequently, Donald now awaited her arrival with some trepidation.

About eleven o'clock she came, unaccompanied except by the old Indian who looked after McTavish's wants. She was small and spare, and wore glasses that enlarged her mild blue eyes. She had overcome nature's delinquency in the matter of luxurious hair by the application of a "transformation," done into numerous elastic curls. Because of the difficulty of communication with the outside world, this was now several shades lighter than her own, a fact which gave her great pain, but was really quite unavoidable.

Leaving the door open, she sat down in the one chair, while Donald leaned on his elbow in the deep window embrasure.

"Oh," she gasped breathlessly, "I suppose you think I'm awful, don't you, Captain?"

Her curls bobbed, and a faint color showed in her cheeks.

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"Quite the contrary, Miss Fitzpatrick," he replied, gravely. "I feel that only the highest motives of — well — er — pity, have actuated you to look in upon a man forced to take a month's rest. It was really kind of you, but have you — er — that is, thought of yourself, and what people might say when it becomes known?"

"Oh, dear," she sighed, "of course that will have to be faced, won't it? But I guess I'm old enough to be past scandal. Really, you have no idea how old I'm getting to be, Captain McTavish."

"A woman is only as old as her impulses, Miss Fitzpatrick," replied the captain, gallantly. "And your impulse this morning could hardly place you above — let's see — twenty at the outside."

The maiden lady appeared uncertain as to the possible compliment in this statement, but at last decided to accept it.

"You're the same old flatterer, Captain, the very same," she gurgled.

Presently, the conversation dragged.

"Do you know why I came to see you today?" asked Miss Fitzpatrick, and, at Donald's negation, continued: "I thought you must be lonesome out here, particularly with everyone gone on the expedition, and — and — I came to tell you that I think your imprisonment is the most unjust thing I ever heard of."

"Do you, really?" cried the young man, eagerly.

"I certainly do, and I spoke to father about it, severely. For a time, I thought I was going to get

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you off, but something seemed to occur to him, and he got angry, and said not to mention the subject again. But I thought I would tell you just what I think of it."

"I can't thank you enough," said Donald, approaching her impulsively, for the little woman's efforts in his behalf really touched him. "I didn't know I had a friend in the world until this minute, and I tell you I'm grateful — more so than you have any idea. You were more than good, and I sha'n't forget it."

At his approach, Miss Fitzpatrick had pushed her chair back nervously several inches, and, now, Donald turned away to hide the smile that would struggle to his face, despite his efforts at suppression. To bridge the situation, he pulled his pipe from his pocket, and began to examine it intently.

"And that isn't all," continued Miss Fitzpatrick, nerving herself for speech so that her curls quivered violently. "I want you to know that I will do anything in my power to make your confinement here easier, and will always have your interest at heart wherever you are. . . . There!"

"You are a dear little woman, and I'm overwhelmed with your kindness," said Donald, in the deep, rich voice he unconsciously used when moved. And, at that, the scarlet tide of joy that had been hovering uncertainly in Miss Fitzpatrick mounted with a rush and suffused her pale little face.

"Now," she went on briskly, to cover her confusion, "there are a lot of newspapers at the house

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that of course you haven't read. I'll send them over, with a book or two Mrs. Ponshette, at York, sent down for Christmas. You really must do something to pass the time."

Once more, Donald thanked her, when suddenly, without the slightest intention, his pipe slipped from his fingers, and fell to the floor. With an exclamation of annoyance, he picked it up, to find that the amber stem had broken off close to the brier, rendering it almost useless. Now he must have the other pipe, despite what Peter Rainy had hinted, and who could get it but Laura Fitzpatrick?

Showing her the broken pieces in his hand, he exclaimed that life would be unbearable without tobacco, and asked her to send his reserve pipe over from the rack in the hall. This she promised to do, and a little later rose to take her leave.

"You're not a good host, Captain McTavish," she said, at the doorway.

"Why?" he questioned.

"You haven't asked me to call again."

"Forgive me!" cried the confused man. "Please, come as often as you wish. I have enjoyed the visit immensely."

"So have I," she returned, with a coy, sidelong look from her mild blue eyes, and then, at last, she shut the door behind her.

Donald was really grateful for the call, as it had taken his mind from the brooding that had occupied it so continuously, and, for hours afterward, he smiled almost unconsciously at the quaint transpar-

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ency, but utter good-heartedness, of the woman's character.

Early in the afternoon, the promised package of papers and the pipe arrived. The prisoner, who, like all northern woodsmen, found a pipe his boon companion, filled the bowl with tobacco, and tried to light it.

Somehow, the brier would not draw, and McTavish impatiently unscrewed the stem from the bowl to investigate. In the small cavity thus exposed, he saw an obstruction which, when dug out with a pin, proved to be a sheet of thin paper, very carefully rolled.

Straightening it out, Donald saw pencil-marks in strange triangles. There were V's and U's placed in any of four positions, and queer symbols that resembled the "pot-hooks" of shorthand more than anything else.

For a moment, he stared perplexed, and then memory returned to him. This was, indeed, a message from Peter Rainy, and written in the only language the old Indian could use — the Cree symbols into which the Bible had been translated by the zealous missionary, James Evans, back in the fifties. On long winter nights at Fort Dickey, Peter Rainy had taught his superior to read and write in this obsolete fashion.

Now, Donald bent to the work. The first words came hard, but, before he had finished the paper, he was reading easily. And this, freely translated, is what he saw:

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I will be a mile in the woods, along the old beaver trail, from the fifth night after Miss Jean's departure until the tenth. If you do not come by then I will go back to Fort Dickey and return for you when your month is up. There is work for you to do. I have a clew as to Miss Jean, but you must act at once if you expect to save her. I have sawed the bars of your window almost through at the bottom. When in the woods call me with the cry of an owl.

PETER.

And, having read, Donald McTavish mechanically lighted his pipe, and began to smoke furiously.

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CHAPTER X

THE ESCAPE

IT was the old battle between love and duty.

The pile of covered newspapers lay unheeded beside the young man's chair. He pictured Jean Fitzpatrick in every conceivable peril of the winter on those desolate barrens — as the prisoner of Indians, of trappers, as the prey of wild beasts, as the prey of men. He writhed at his impotence, and cursed the day that had seen his rescue on Death Trail. Better a skeleton without flesh, he thought, than a living being whose every thought tortured him to desperation.

And, yet, there was something in the idea of escape that seemed shameful to him. If he had done wrong, he must take his medicine; if he had failed, he must atone for the failure according to the decrees of his superior. That was the discipline in him responding to the discipline of Fitzpatrick. It was the iron McTavish to the fore rather than the passionate flesh-and-blood McTavish.

A grim smile lighted his features for a moment, as he thought of Laura, the factor's daughter, innocently placing in his hands the means of setting at naught her father's commands. Her naïve zeal for his welfare might react to her own loss.

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The thing that at last decided Donald was the abiding sense of injustice that had all along burned in him against this humiliating confinement. Had he been actually unfaithful to duty, he would have put the thought of escape away harshly. As it was, the inherent fear of that great, inevitable Juggernaut, the Company, stirred in him. But he crushed it down resolutely. This was an affair of persons, not of companies. . . . He would go!

To-night was the fifth after Jean's departure. There was much to be done before he could be ready. Then, too, something might have happened to Peter to prevent his reaching the rendezvous on time. Donald decided that he would go the next night

The manner Peter Rainy had indicated was the only feasible one for escape. The room in which the captive was confined was one of some twenty-odd built along the strong wall that surrounded the post. Across the narrow corridor that connected the row of rooms on the inside, the heavy masonry of the wall jutted out roughly. At the end of the corridor, a stout door was locked and bolted at night, so that during the dark hours the window was the only means of egress.

Next morning, after breakfast, Donald called the old Indian servant to him.

"Michael," he said, "this is just the time for me to do some work on my outfit. My fur suit is badly in need of repair, and one of my showshoes needs restringing near the curl. I want to be all ship-

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shape when my time is up. Will you bring them to me?"

The Indian's instant acquiescence gave the young man a pang. Such was his reputation for honor among these men that his jailer had often declared he could leave the doors unlocked and still have a prisoner in the morning. Now, Donald was about to blast this old man's faith. He shrugged his shoulders helplessly, however, and thought no more on the subject. Once his decision had been made, he would hold fast by it to the end.

McTavish had spoken truly. His hunting suit of white caribou was badly frayed and worn after his blind wanderings in the forest, and not only did one snowshoe need restringing, but both were loose from his frequent awkward falls. Even old Michael, whose eyes were weak, could see these things.

With *atibisc* — fine, tough sinews of the caribou — Donald strung the defective toe, and then made a not very successful shift at tightening the center webbing of *askimoneiab*, or heavy, membranous moose filling. The mending of his clothes was a comparatively simple matter by means of needle and thread.

All day he worked at this, so planning that evening should find the task uncompleted, as an excuse for Michael to leave the equipment over night.

As fortune would have it, snow began to fall shortly before sundown, and McTavish was robbed of the stars for guidance once he should be free. But the heavy, swirling curtain of flakes made his

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work inside the fort much easier. At dinner-time, the wind had risen, and the storm outside was of such fury that only the hardiest Indian or trapper would have ventured out in it. This gave the captive some concern, but he realized that he must either go now, or else lose his opportunity.

As was his custom, Michael sat up smoking with a few cronies in a near-by room until about ten o'clock. Then, he let his friends out of the corridor, and securely fastened the door behind them with lock and bolt. After that, he looked into McTavish's room, to find the Scotchman almost ready for bed. With his customary respectful good-night, he shut and locked the door, and shuffled on to his own quarters.

Immediately, now, Donald dressed himself quickly, and then put out the lamp, which had made a square glow on the snow outside. Presently, the light in Michael's room, also, went out. McTavish, crossing the floor noiselessly in his moccasins, sat down in his chair, and smoked his new pipe, for the better part of an hour. By that time, a gentle buzzing, varied with wheezes and whines, attested that Michael was asleep.

Forthwith, Donald stepped cautiously to the window. He was fully acquainted with its peculiarities; he had studied them all day. It was one of those squares of wood and glass set into a frame without any means of opening either by lifting or swinging. To escape, he would have to push the window bodily from its frame.

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But then what? The bars were outside, and not two inches away.

Following a plan already matured, he took a block of wood from the box beside the little, pot-bellied iron stove. This he wrapped in a blanket, and used as a battering ram, at first gently, but, presently, with more force, since the noise of the storm without almost negatived any other sound. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Each corner of the window, in turn, moved an eighth of an inch from its long resting-place, with many groans and snappings of wood and ice. But, resolutely, he kept to the work, stopping every now and then to listen and make sure that Michael was still breathing heavily.

At last, the window was at the edge of its deep casement, and Donald now devoted his entire attention to the lower corners. Tapping them gently, he got them gradually to swing off the frame, and the blast came rushing in. The window now appeared as though swung from hinges at the top. McTavish pushed it until it came to rest against the iron bars outside. There was an inch and a half of space beneath the outswung frame.

Then, the prisoner changed his tools. Going to the stove, he returned with the poker, and the end of this he set firmly against the last bar to the right. A quick, mighty effort, and the sawed iron snapped noiselessly, and bent outward and upward. One after another, he gave the remaining four the same treatment. Eventually, they all stood out six inches from their almost imperceptible stumps.

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Now, to get rid of the window. Donald resorted once again to his muffled block of wood, and tapped at the top until the frame dropped silently off into the snow. To bend the bars back so as to allow his exit was now an easy matter, and soon accomplished. With his snowshoes in his hands, he wriggled head first through the square opening, and landed easily on the heaped snow.

With nimble fingers, the snowshoes were quickly strapped on, when an idea occurred to him. He groped on the ground until he found the window. This he lifted up and inserted in the frame, driving it home with a few sharp blows. Then, he bent the iron bars back down until each fitted nicely over its stump. Whimsically, he imagined old Michael's amazement and superstitious fear when he should find the animal gone, but the trap itself still unsprung.

But what was that? Where did that light come from? McTavish was just bending the last bar into place when he saw the glow on the snow about him, and looked up in terror. There, in the room, with lamp held high and terror on his face, stood the old Indian, gazing on the undisturbed bed. Even as Donald looked, Michael, the instinct of the hunter still strong in him, leaped toward the window, the only possible means of escape.

With a curse the fugitive shrank back, then sprang into the storm as fast as he could struggle against it. But so strong was the wind that he could scarcely move, and all the while he could feel the Indian's

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eyes striving to pierce through the snow curtain to him.

And then, five minutes later, came the sound of a bell being violently tolled, and he knew that Michael had given the alarm.

That night of terrible storm the few men still left in the fort dreamed of battle and murder and Indian attacks, as they had been in the old days; fires were heaped high, and frightened children were quieted. What then was the chill that gripped them by the heart when above the howling of the blast the old warning tocsin broke out! Hands clutched at guns and clothing, and the women and children ran to the windows, sick for fear lest the fort be afire.

But there was no glow brightening and growing lurid through the snow curtain. Commanding their dependents to light lamps and dress, the men made all speed to the vestibule of the old soldiers' quarters, where McTavish had been confined, on top of which the bell whirled over and over, its unaccustomed voice thin and shrill with cold. It was twenty years since that bell had sounded a general alarm, and the men, wild with anxiety, rushed in upon Michael.

Meanwhile, McTavish was experiencing a fearful trial. During the day, his plans of campaign had been worked out thoroughly and had appeared simple. But, now, confused, battered, whirled ruthlessly about, a plaything in the mighty wind, he was scarcely able to tell his right from his left, and, had

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it not been for Michael's zeal in giving the alarm, this story might have ended here.

With the sound of the bell to give him direction, McTavish bore off to the left. There, the snow had been drifted high against the wall. More than that, the path that ran along the latter had contributed materially to the height of the bank, and McTavish counted on this means of scaling the fifteen-foot obstruction. . . . Would he ever find the place?

At last, he felt the ascent under his feet, and struggled up. With a thankfulness that he had never before experienced, he found but three feet of wall confronting him at the top, and swung his feet over quickly. What fortune awaited him on the long drop to earth, he did not know. He remembered the spot in summer as a grassy mound, with a few small rocks showing here and there. With fatalistic indifference, he pushed himself off, and, after a breathless second, struck the hard snow crust, and went through it with a crash, snowshoes and all, sinking to his ankles. It took but a moment to extricate himself, and he now turned his back to the wind, which was theoretically from the north — "theoretically," because in a genuine blizzard the wind has been known to blow upon the bewildered traveler from four directions inside a minute. Everywhere one turns, he is met by a breath-taking blast.

The old Beaver Trail started south of the fort, alongside the little hillock where Jean had been tobogganing the day of her disappearance, and thence ran for miles, crossing the little streams and

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ponds where the beaver villages had been built. Because most of the beaver colonies had been broken up along this route, the trail had been superseded by another, called the New Trail; hence this was an unfrequented, almost untraveled, path that Peter Rainy had named.

Donald McTavish knew every shrub, tree, and stone within a mile of Fort Severn in any direction, after the summer spent there, and to-night he relied upon his recognition of inanimate objects to lead him aright. A ghostly spruce with a wedge-shaped bite out of its stiff foliage told him he was a hundred feet to the right; a flat-topped rock, suddenly stumbled upon, convinced him that for five minutes he had been walking back toward the fort.

The alarm-bell had ceased ringing now, and he could hear nothing but the shriek of the wind, the hollow roaring of it in the woods, and the hiss and whish of driving snow. The folds of his *capote* protected him partially from the stinging particles, and his gauntleted hands shielded his eyes somewhat.

Not another man in Fort Severn could have found the old Beaver Trail that night, and many a time during the hour Donald blessed the memory of Jean Fitzpatrick and their many excursions in the vicinity of the post. By devious zigzags and retracings, he suddenly found himself face to face with a ten-foot stump that Indians had long ago carved into a sort of totem, which had been left standing as a curiosity. There, the trail began, and he was able to make faster time, although all evidence of a footway were,

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of course, obliterated. As he went deeper into the forest, the wind became steadier and less changeable in direction, and the snow lost the worst of its sting.

Still guided by old, friendly landmarks, Donald drew near the rendezvous. He knew the place well. It was slightly off the trail, behind a bowlder. At last he reached it and peered around. There, sleeping in a huddle, his feet to a camp-fire, the sleigh snow-banked as a wind break, and the dogs curled in a black-and-white, steaming bundle, Peter Rainy lay unconcernedly.

With a cry of joy, Donald awakened his faithful servant, and, in the comparative shelter of the rock, told his story briefly.

"Quick, kick the dogs up!" he cried. "We must push on at once. I am followed."

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CHAPTER XI

A HOT SCENT

WITHOUT a word, Rainy made preparations for moving. A lesser woodsman or lazier servant would have demurred, for, while the blizzard lasted, there was scarcely a chance in a million that any searcher from the fort would find their hiding-place. Even now, the newcomer's tracks were already wiped clean from the white page of the snow.

But, when the storm cleared away, as it might do with great suddenness, they would be in great peril of observation, for, until they should reach the denser forest to the south, there would be many open spots to be crossed — open spots well within the range of a field-glass at the fort.

While Peter hitched up the growling dogs, Donald made the pack, and fastened it on the sledge. But, before they were ready to scatter the fire and plunge into the maelstrom of the storm, the Scotchman pulled the other's sleeve.

"What was that clew you had in regard to Jean Fitzpatrick?" he shouted above the wind.

"Friends told me, very quiet, that old Maria, who was at the fort the day before we arrived, and who tried to see the factor, had kidnaped her. But for

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what reason I have no idea. Maybe she's angry because old Fitzpatrick wouldn't see her, but the man who told me hinted at other things."

"Was he an Indian?"

"Yes; it was Tee-ka-mee."

"How did he know?"

"Butts tell him, he said. He and Butts good friends, because of working in the house together."

"Why didn't they say as much when the search was being made? Then, they could have run this Indian hag to earth."

"Like most English servants, that Butts was afraid to speak out, and Tee-ka-mee says the idea never occurred to him until too late."

"Do you think it is good talk, and that the old woman did the trick?"

"I think it is the most likely explanation. At least, it is something to work on."

Shortly afterward, they drove the dogs from the shelter of the rock into the teeth of the storm. Then, turning, they fled south before the gale with what certitude they might. They had nothing to guide them, neither stars nor brilliant aurora, and they struggled along the heavy trail only by their memories of it, and the exercise of every particle of woodcraft they both possessed.

The trail was cruelly heavy with the snow, and the dogs floundered shoulder-deep at times, even when the two men had gone on before to break the way. Traveling would be hard until a warm west wind melted the surface, and gave a crust chance to

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form over-night. Frequently, they rested in the lee of a bold rock, and continued their talk. They left no back trail, for hardly could they lift a foot ere the hollow it had formed had been filled with snow. On one of these occasions McTavish asked:

"Who is this Maria?"

Peter Rainy did not seem to hear, and bent down to examine the dog-harness. Donald repeated the question, and was surprised to have his companion change the subject without answering. There was something peculiar about this, and a third time he put the query, uttering it now in a tone of authority.

"Captain," said the Indian, "I would rather not tell you. It would only make you unhappy."

"I'll be much more unhappy if I know there is a mystery, without knowing what it is. Tell me, Peter. We must go on in a minute."

"Maria is the mother of Charley Seguis."

"Well," Donald exclaimed impatiently, as the other paused, "what's so terrible about that?"

"Don't you remember last summer, at the fort, that he was there all the time; that he made a great show with his cleverness among the maidens, but would have none of them? And why would he not? Truly, they were rare Indian maidens, and warm with love, but his eyes were elsewhere. As the wolf looks upward, and wishes the beautiful white moon, so did he look upward and desire the lovely white daughter of the factor."

"What are you telling me, you devil?" shouted McTavish, his eyes blazing.

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The old Indian did not move, but bent slightly, as though expecting a blow.

"I did not wish to tell you, Captain," he said, with dignity, "but you forced me. Then, too, perhaps, it is just as well that you know early rather than late. Perhaps, old Maria took the girl just for spite of old Fitzpatrick. I hope that is the only reason."

"And yet — and yet — !" muttered Donald between clenched teeth. His tongue refused to utter the foul alternative.

Silent, they moved out in the storm once more, and McTavish bent to the work with a will. It was good to battle, to struggle with the elements on this wild night; it was good to weary himself with labor and to keep his mind alert with the changing exigencies of every step. Else, he should be beside himself with fear and impotence.

In flashes, he pondered on what he had heard: the Indian woman's fruitless visit to Fitzpatrick, her relationship to Charley Seguis, her sudden abduction of Jean. There was something about these things that presented to his understanding a wall of insurmountable height. Then, he recalled his last interview with Jean and the suspicions that had been cast upon himself, suspicions he had vainly endeavored to fathom. What was in the wind, anyhow? he asked himself. There seemed to be forces at work over which he had no control, forces big with portent, heavy with menace. Like a towering thundercloud that casts its sickly green over all about, so

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these unknown influences were overshadowing all the lives around him.

There was but one thing to do. Probe matters to the bottom, force the issues, and drive these disquieting rumors out of the country. But how to accomplish this? There was but one answer to that question in Donald's mind, and it was the answer of the man in primitive surroundings thousands of years ago. He would marry Jean Fitzpatrick out of hand, and then start asking questions. If she did not yet love him, she would learn to; if her father did not like it, he would have to make the best of matters. For the present, Sturgeon Lake was out of the question for Donald. He would attend to that later. Just now, Jean was in danger of worse things than death, and needed him. He would devote his attention entirely to her.

All that night, Rainy, McTavish, and the dogs toiled like galley-slaves, not sure of their exact direction, but aware that they were taking a general southerly course away from the fort. Morning found them fully ten miles on their way, with no back trail, and the blizzard lessening perceptibly. It did not matter now. Their tracks would be taken for those of a trapper running his line.

They halted for breakfast in the lee of a bluff, just as a muddy light made itself apparent.

"Shall we rest now, Captain?" asked Rainy.

But Donald said no, and told the old servant his reasons and his plans. An hour's inactivity represented to him a hundred hideous possibilities. They

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must travel fast in the general direction of Sturgeon Lake, and try to pick up the trail of Maria, the squaw. . . . So, after an hour, they pressed on again, finding easier traveling and making better time.

That night they came to a little lake, perhaps a mile wide, and on the opposite shore discerned a wretched shanty. They decided to camp here, for the dogs were weak with exhaustion. Rainy attended to the unharnessing of the animals and the unpacking of the sledge, while Donald went out to cut wood for the fire and boughs to sleep on. When he returned and entered the cabin, he found the Indian examining something closely. It proved to be a charred ember. Rainy fingered it and smelled it, and finally announced that it was not more than a day old. The two then went outside, and circled slowly about the shanty.

Here, forty miles from Fort Severn, the blizzard had been light, and the snowfall trifling. Presently, they uncovered faint tracks leading away southwest, and judged, from the edge of the crust where the sledge had occasionally broken through, that they were not older than thirty-six hours.

Once more, the mania for travel seized McTavish, and he was all for setting out on the trail that night. But Peter Rainy restrained him, showing him the folly of such action, since both dogs and men were unfit for work.

In the cabin, at one time, there had been a bunk. The flat shelf still projected out from the wall.

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Donald entered with an armful of spruce boughs, and threw them on the bunk. While he was arranging them to a semblance of smoothness for the blankets, his hand struck something hard and cold. He picked the object up and held it to the light of the fire. Then, with a cry, he leaned forward, and examined it intently.

It was a bone button from Jean Fitzpatrick's fur outer garment.

That it was hers, there could be no doubt, for the reason that in the very center was a tiny raised flagpole and flag, the latter enameled red — the banner of the Hudson Bay Company. The buttons were a curiosity, and were the work of an old squaw for whom Jean had done many little kindnesses.

How had it got here? There was but one explanation: Maria, Tom, her full-blooded Indian son, and Jean had occupied this lonely cabin.

"Surely it is hers," said Peter Rainy, examining the object. "But see, Captain. It's now six days since they took her away. The trail going from here was made day before yesterday. Why should they have stayed here so long?"

"I don't know — I don't know!" muttered Donald, walking up and down outside the door excitedly. "But we have no other clew; we must follow this one. With two women they are traveling slowly. We can overtake them."

During the night, the sky cleared, and, when McTavish woke after several hours of troubled sleep, the stars were bright. It was four o'clock;

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but he routed out his whole establishment, and in less than an hour they were on their way, so that by daylight they had put fifteen miles behind them.

They traveled as they had never done before, following the dim trail before them with the speed and instinct of wild things. Tireless, elastic, winged with snowshoes, the miles flowed under them.

At eleven o'clock, they came upon the ruins of a camp-fire, which had evidently been scattered that morning, and, encouraged by this, Donald could barely stop to make tea. The afternoon was a race with darkness. Could he have done so, he would have commanded the sullen sun to stand still. Now, with a vicious cut at the faltering dogs, now with a cry of encouragement to Peter Rainy, he ran on, his shirt open at the front, his throat bare.

Hour by hour, the trail grew fresher. Now, they paused at the open glades before crossing them. They listened for the jingle of bells in the distance, and took their own off the harness, an act that nearly ended their day's journey, for the dogs could scarcely be induced to travel without this musical accompaniment. Darkness, at last, began to settle.

Suddenly, the force of inspiration that had held him up so long, deserted the young man, and he wavered where he stood, shading his eyes across an open space.

"What do you see, Peter?" he gasped, sitting down abruptly, for very weakness.

The Indian stood gazing for a long time in silence.

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"Far off, I see a shanty and a dog-train in front of it," he said, slowly. "And, now, I see smoke coming from the chimney."

"How many people are there?" cried Donald excitedly, getting to his feet again. "Tell me, quick! How many?"

"That I cannot see," answered the Indian, after a moment's piercing scrutiny.

"Mush! Mush on!" cried McTavish, curling the long whip over the dogs' backs, and once more the mad race was under way.

Over the smooth, glazed crust, into low, powdery drifts, under windfalls or around them, down the forest aisles, or across bare, open spaces, they whirled, the men at a tireless, gliding lope, the dogs at a fast trot.

Nearer came the shanty and its curl of smoke. Now, it was but a quarter of a mile away, and the going was all down-hill and clear. The men jumped aboard the sledge, and called to the dogs, which responded by breaking into a gallop. Thus silently, without bells, the equipage descended upon the unknown travelers in the shanty.

A hundred yards away, the strange dogs sounded the alarm, and, ten seconds later, Donald's team was engaged in a free fight that threatened to put an end to every strip of harness.

While Peter Rainy stayed to separate the combatants, Donald sprang off, and rushed ahead to the shanty. At that moment, two persons stepped out of the door, a man and a woman.

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Even at fifty yards, there could be no doubt as to their identity: They were the old hag Maria and her Indian son, Tom.

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CHAPTER XII

MARIA TAKES ACTION

"GOOD-EVENING," said Donald, courteously, in the Ojibway tongue. With all his impatience, he knew better than to be precipitate. Tom and Maria responded in kind to his salutation, and the usual amenities of those who find themselves at a camping-place together were exchanged. Of course, the newcomers would not think of occupying the cabin, since the others had reached it first, even though Donald's rank in the Hudson Bay Company entitled him to the best to be had.

They were fortunate, he said, in the locating of such an admirable shelter; in fact, it was one of the best he had seen, warm, well made, with room for the dogs. Whose was it? They told him an Indian name, and he continued his complimentary talk, approaching the door all the time.

Truly, this good Indian would have to be recommended to the factor for keeping his place in such fine order. See! Even the door fitted in its frame, and did not sag on its hinges when he opened it. There would be — He entered.

The monologue suddenly ceased, and, after a silent moment, a groan from the heart of the agonized man came to the ears of those outside. Pres-

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ently, he emerged, white and wretched-looking, his face drawn with weariness and disappointment.

Yet, in his eyes there was something that made the two rascally Ojibways shift uneasily. Donald was not sure whether or not he had heard a smothered snicker, during the moment that he found himself alone in the cabin, but he intended to find out.

"Tom," he said, "where are the hunting-grounds to which you are going?"

"By Beaver Lake."

"You are much too far south to be on the way to Beaver Lake. Something else has brought you here."

"My mother is getting old; she prefers to travel the forest, and not the muskeg trails. For that we came south."

"Every other winter, she has traveled them safely, Tom. Something else has brought you here."

"I swear it is not so, Captain," said the Indian, in a tone of defiance rather than of humility—a tone that proved him untruthful then and there.

"You lie, Tom Seguis!" cried McTavish fiercely. All the disappointments of the day leaped into rage at this provoking answer.

"If I do, I learned it from white men," came the insulting answer.

Inasmuch as the only white men of his acquaintance were Hudson Bay officials, this constituted a slurring piece of impudence that demanded instant retribution.

Without a word, Donald slipped the gloves from

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his hands, and leaped upon Tom, smashing him to right and left with one well-directed blow after the other. The Indian was unarmed, and no match for the captain. But not so his mother. Almost imperceptibly, the leering hag crept closer to the combat, one hand glued to her side.

So intent was she in watching for an opening that she did not hear Peter Rainy approaching. Suddenly, Tom, thrusting out his fists in desperation from the merciless beating, caught his assailant under the chin, and halted him a second. In that second, the old hag sprang, the cold steel glinting in her hand.

But Peter, with a shout, was upon her, wrenching away the weapon and hurling her, squawking, toward the cabin, where, cursing like a medicine-man, she searched blindly for a rifle until Rainy took that also away from her, and shut her in the cabin. Meanwhile, the thrashing of Tom went methodically on, until he was unable to rise from the snow, and could scarcely bawl an apology between his swollen, bleeding lips.

Such is the discipline of a region where law is a remote thing, and the mention of a name must carry terror for thousands of miles.

McTavish, as he punished Indian Tom with merciless severity, was no longer McTavish. He was the Company; he was discipline; he was the "inevitable white man." And, by the same token, Tom was the conquered race that had dared to doubt the power of its conqueror. This battle in the snow enacted the

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drama of America's Siberia as it has been enacted for two hundred years.

Tom not only delivered himself of an apology at Donald's demand, but expressed a willingness, even a desire, to atone for his wrong-doing by telling the truth of the matter that had given rise to the trouble. Having the situation well in hand, the Hudson Bay man set Peter to making the camp outside, while he entered the cabin with Tom.

"Where is the factor's daughter?" he fiercely demanded.

"She left us two days ago," mumbled the Indian.

"And you will never see her again," snarled Maria, crouching before the fire.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Ha, ha! She is in good company. She has a man now — a good man — a man such as a woman ought to love," croaked the venomous crone, glaring.

"In heaven's name, speak out, old woman! Who's she with?"

"Charley Seguis. He is a good man. The women all love him." And she rocked herself to and fro, like some horrible old witch. Donald stared at her, wild-eyed.

"When did he get her?" he groaned. "How? Where?"

"Two days ago, at the other cabin," broke in Tom, hastily. "We waited for him there, and he came and got her."

"Was there anyone with him, or did he come alone?"

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"Two others, an Indian and a French trapper," was the answer.

"Where did they go?" The little, close cabin seemed to reel about the distraught lover.

"To Sturgeon Lake."

"The truth!" cried Donald, frantically. "Tell me the truth, or, by heaven, I'll break every bone in your body!" With hands opening and closing convulsively, he advanced upon Tom.

But the latter had had enough, and he cowered away from his interrogator, protesting his good faith. So genuine were his terrified protestations that the questioner was convinced.

"But he shall have her, Charley Seguis shall have her," chanted old Maria, still rocking to and fro.

McTavish, sick at heart and at a loss what to do next, went out of the cabin and over to the camp that Rainy had made in the snow near the foot of a big tree. There, he told the old Indian what he had learned, and appealed to him for counsel. For an hour, the latter kept silent, and in that time they fed the dogs, and cooked their own supper of fish, flat flour cakes, and tea. At last, when all was done and the young man's spirits had risen with the strength the hot food brought him, Peter Rainy spoke.

"These people have done wrong," he said, indicating the shanty. "They must be punished. They must go back to Fort Severn to hear the factor's judgment. One of us must take them. It should not be you; your heart yearns onward for the

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thing that is dearest to it, and you must follow that call.

"Give me authority, and I will take them back, so they can make no more trouble. Tom is a good Indian, except with his mother. Him I trust, but that old squaw" — he shook his head gravely — "if she lived on the plains, she would cut down a burial-tree to build a fire. That's the kind she is. I'll not feel safe until she's in jail."

"If you are going back with them," broke in Donald, "you can use their dog-train, and I'll keep this one."

"It is Buller's, and should be at Fort Dickey," Rainy replied. "Cardepie's is the only one left there now. But there's no other way, I guess."

"None. And, Peter, we must set watch to-night, so they can't escape us. Four hours on and off; I'll stand the first one."

"Master, you are very weary, and need sleep, for we have traveled far. Let me watch first."

But Donald respected the years of his companion, and gently maintained his purpose. When they were ready for the night, he went to the cabin, and placed Maria and Tom under arrest. Before taking his watch, he tore a page from his note-book, and wrote a signed statement, authorizing Peter Rainy as deputy to conduct the Indians to Fort Severn.

Building a fire before the cabin door, he began walking up and down, fighting desperately the almost overpowering sleep that weighed upon his eyelids. Doubly exhausted by the day's efforts and disclosures,

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every moment was a renewed struggle, and every hour an eternity.

A rising wind roared with hollow sound among the trees, and drove the snow-powder into his face. The stars, glinting diamonds in the blue-black vault over-head, twinkled and coruscated with brittle fires. Now and then, a report like a rifle stabbed the stillness when a tree cracked with its freezing sap. . . . Donald sat down on a log.

His mind was filled with bitter thoughts, and he remembered for the first time that he was in reality nothing but an escaped prisoner. But all that trouble could be attended to later. It had sunk into insignificance beside the hideous verities that the day had revealed.

Into his mind flashed a picture of Jean as he had seen her last. The sweet, virginal face, the red-bronze aureole of her soft hair, the gray wool dress with touches of red warming it at throat and waist and wrist — all these were in the picture.

Would he ever see her again as she had been that bitter day? Would there be something gone from that innocent face, some of its sweet purity? Or would there be something added, a flicker of eternal fear in the wide, blue eyes, or the stamp of hell across the fair brow? The face merged slowly into a general indistinctness until with a shock it all cleared away, and he felt a sharp pain in the back of his neck.

Then he realized that sleep had stolen upon him and that his head had rolled forward uncontrolled.

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With a curse, he sat up and looked at his watch. Two hours yet before he could call Peter Rainy. He put some more wood on the fire, but dared not look at the fascination of the dancing flames. He felt a sort of resentment that these two dirty Indians must be watched, and so break into his much needed rest. He riveted his attention upon the stars, and began to name over the constellations he could see. There was the Great Bear, the trapper's timepiece in the wilderness; and there, almost directly above him and very bright, the North Star, the hunter's compass. Then, there was the Big Dipper, very high, and the Little Bear. Southerly, through the trees, and looking like an arc-lamp suspended there, Sirius gleamed, while very low and to the left was the belt of Orion.

Suddenly, the entire solar system described violent circles of fire before his eyes, and a dull shock seemed to shake him. He knew something was wrong, and strove to gain his feet, or cry out, before it was too late. But, in an instant, he realized that he was powerless to move, and, in the next, the whirling constellations gave place to utter, velvet blackness.

When he struggled back to consciousness, the first thing Donald sensed was that something pleasantly warm lay upon his face. After a while, he discovered that this gentle glow must be from the sun.

"How's this?" he said to himself. "The whole camp must have slept late," and he struggled to a sitting posture, only to give vent to a groan of agony.

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His head throbbed and pained him horribly, and he pressed his hand to the aching place only to find that a huge bruise and swelling had appeared overnight. Then, disjointed thoughts began to link themselves together, and his addled brain cleared itself with a violent effort. He looked about staringly, and took in the scene: the cabin, the hole where Peter had camped, his own fire.

"Nobody's here," he said, blankly; "that's funny."

Flashes of half-truth commenced to lighten the darkness of his mind, and he pressed his hands against his temples hard, telling himself not to go mad — that everything would come out all right. No one was in sight, the fires were almost dead, the cabin door was open, so that he could see that the place was unoccupied. Then, he looked for stars, and laughed, because the sun was up.

But the thought of the stars set him on the right track, and, closing his jaws tightly on the fear that now took possession of him, he staggered about from one spot to another, working out the situation piece by piece. At last, the whole truth and every event of the day and night before came back to him with a rush. He sat down abruptly, and dry sobs shook him. . . . He was weary and hungry and weak, but his mind was clear again, and he thanked God for that. So near had he come to concussion of the brain from old Maria's vicious club!

When he had recovered a little, he made another circuit of the camp. Like a child in the midst of a

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group of grinning wolves, he was helpless in the center of absolute desolation. Neither dog, sledge, food, nor covering had they left him. He was stripped of everything except a hunting-knife, which he luckily wore beneath his caribou shirt. Like Andrée stepping from his balloon in the snowy arctic wastes, McTavish might have been dropped solitary where he was by some huge, passing bird.

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CHAPTER XIII.

A RESCUE AND A SURPRISE

THERE was in Donald, as in all who battle with the monstrous moods of nature, a certain calm fatalism, or acceptance of the inevitable. When he had recovered his self-possession and the full use of his faculties, he got to his feet again, and made a second inspection of the camp. As he had noted at first, the place was stripped clean. An old bit of moose-gut, which had evidently been taken from a worn snowshoe, was the only thing to be found in the shanty. The string was some six feet long, and McTavish, with the trapper's instinct of hoarding every possible item, rolled it up and put it in his pocket. Of food there was none; Maria had done her best to put him beyond the need of sustenance, but, now that he was himself once more, the yearning to eat seized his vitals, and he knew he must make all haste to satisfy it. When he was struck, his snowshoes had been on his feet, and the Indians in their haste, or because of the darkness, had not removed them, so he had this slight help in the problems he faced.

Suddenly, something caught McTavish's ear as he stood listening, a sort of rushing, roaring sound like waters, yet muffled as though coming from a cañon. Having no pocket compass, he had to find directions

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by the moss at the foot of a tree. As he dug with a snowshoe, the end of the racket struck something hard. With an effort, he rolled this up to view, and found it to be the shoulder-blade of a bear, smooth and white, when cleaned of the snow and leaves that clung to it.

An idea now took possession of him, and, when he had got his bearings, he listened again for the sound of muffled waters, then followed whither his ears led him. Now and then, the bulk of a rock or a bend of the stream itself would deceive him, and it was nearly a half-hour before he came to the slightly raised banks of a little river, perhaps a hundred feet in width. Here, the noise of waters was very loud, and he realized what it was.

While most streams turn gradually into solid blocks of ice, miles long, there are some whose extremely swift current and turbulent rapids prevent anything but a thin coat forming across from shore to shore. Beneath this green shell, the water roars and tumbles all winter, except perhaps in the most terrible weather. Such was the stream upon which Donald had come. He felt that luck was with him, and the idea that had taken possession of him back in the woods returned. From his left pocket, he drew forth the shoulder-blade of the bear, and unlimbered his knife from beneath his shirt. Fortunately, this had been a small bear, and the work before him did not represent more than an hour's time. Meanwhile, his stomach clamored for food, and he set his jaws resolutely. In the forest it is truer than

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elsewhere that haste makes waste, and, as materials are rare and valuable, patience is the trapper's stock in trade.

McTavish sat down on the bank, and carved busily until the bone between his hands took the appearance of a fish-hook, barb and all. Then he unlaced his moccasins, and tied the strings together, adding to this line the moose-gut he had found in the shanty. A flat stone with a small hole in it rewarded fifteen minutes' prowling along the banks, and this he used as a sinker, tying a knot beneath the hole. A rod was easily procured, and for bait he took a piece of the red flannel that lined his leggings.

Next, he built a fire on top of the bank, and lastly chopped through three inches of ice, a quarter of the way across the stream, where he dropped his line. He did not have to wait long. Fish, like everything else in the northern winter, find foodstuffs rare and costly, and scarcely ten minutes had passed before a three-pound trout lay flopping on the ice beside him.

Considerately waiting until it was dead, the Hudson Bay man cleaned it, and thrust it on forked sticks to cook over the fire while he went on fishing.

Before the first savory whiffs reached him four more trout had eagerly taken the bait. Presently, he left work at the hole, and returned to the fire, where he enjoyed the most life-giving meal he had ever eaten, excepting the first after Peter Rainy's rescue of him. The thought projected Rainy into his

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mind, and for the hundredth time he asked himself what had become of the old Indian.

The only possible explanation to offer itself was that Maria and Tom had first disposed of their sleeping warder, and had then crawled up on Rainy, who was sleeping like a log, bound him, and taken him away on the sledge, leaving McTavish either to die as he lay, or within a few days after awakening.

Well, Donald admitted, the chances were against him, and the outlook was indeed dark. But, even in these desperate straits, there was a buoyancy in his spirits that he had seldom enjoyed. Life seemed good while he was yet alive to fight for it; he had youth, strength, hope, and the spur of deeds to be done, all of which roweled his faith whenever it faltered. Even this morning, he felt unaccountably like flinging his arms into the air, and shouting to the desolation:

"Come on, old wilderness, we'll fight it out, and, by heaven, I'll break you, too!" . . . What was it, this buoyancy of soul? Did it portend anything?

Hark! What was that? Through the clear, thin air came the sound of silvery bells, *clink, clink, a-tinkle-inkle, clink-a-tinkle, clink, clink,* as the dogs trotted on some distant trail. Were they approaching? Five minutes later, Donald was sure they were, and with a few swift kicks scattered his fire. Then, he ran down to the water's edge, and removed his fish and home-made line, finally retreating up the bank to a vantage-point behind a bushy tree. Too many

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persons were anxious to lay hands on him for him to greet the unknown voyager with open arms.

The banks of the stream in front of him were perhaps ten feet high and sloped sharply to the water's edge, fairly free from tangle. Presently, McTavish localized the sound of bells as coming from the opposite bank, and expected to watch the equipage, preceded or accompanied by trapper or hunter, speed past, following the direction of the stream. What was his surprise, therefore, suddenly to see a huge, fine-looking dog top the opposite shore and start down the incline to the ice, followed in turn by three others. Then came the sledge, and on it the driver of the train.

McTavish's attention was now suddenly riveted to the first dog. There was a perfectly white arrow-head marked in the dark-brown hair above his eyes, and all four feet were white. Aside from this there was a certain dignity in the animal's carriage that marked him at once. McTavish almost leaped from his cover.

It was Mistisi, the leader of his own train. Yes! and those others were his, Chibe and Keoha and Commish. Who, then, was the person in the sleigh? With startled eyes, he tried to discover the face and figure huddled under the mass of robes, but could not.

There was only one person it might be, only one person who could possibly be using his dogs after the adventure at Sturgeon Lake — Charley Seguis. But

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what was he doing here? Where were his comrades? Where was Jean?

Breathlessly, for he felt his peril to be very great, Donald watched the magnificent team and sledge plunge down the bank to the river. He only prayed that the rider might not see the hole he had cut in the ice.

With a creak and lurch, the sleigh left the grade, and took the white snow edging the shoal water that led out to the deep green of the middle ice. The watcher drew a sharp breath.

"Great heavens! Doesn't the fool know that's thin ice?" he muttered, excitedly. "Does he want to drown?"

It all happened in a moment. There was a crunch, a cracking, a sound of plunging, and the dogs went into the biting water. Another second, and the sledge careened and settled among the jagged pieces of ice that surrounded it on all sides. The figure rolled off with a cry.

What should he do? Here was the opportunity to let nature end the feud between Seguis and himself. The man's bitter punishment was overtaking him alone amid the grim watchers of the wild. Why not let the tragedy go on to its inevitable close? All this in an instant. Then, the law of humanity laid hold on Donald; the command of the wilderness that drives men through unheard-of perils to another's help.

With a shout, he leaped from his cover, sped down the bank, and out upon the frozen river. The

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dogs, tangled in their harness, were fighting their own last battle, while drifting down-stream, struggling against the deadly haul of the sledge that dragged them under. The fur-wrapped figure showed now and then, rolling amid the jagged ice.

A hundred feet away, a point ran out into the water. The fighting dogs would be there in a moment, for Mistisi, in his desperate attempts to climb upon the frail support, broke the ice in front of him with his powerful forepaws. Donald ran with all his strength, and reached the point just as Mistisi came abreast. Because farthest from the sledge, the great animal was still alive, but the others had either disappeared, or were lying on their sides, dead. Seizing the harness, Donald lifted the dog, and with two swift slashes cut the traces. Then, with a mighty effort, he heaved Mistisi out of the water beside him on the point.

Presently, the human form, struggling no longer, floated down, and the man seized it. A moment more, and it, too, lay beside the exhausted dog on the bank. A quick glance assured him that he could do nothing for the other animals, and he turned his attention to the inert, unconscious body. He folded back the *capote*, and uttered a great cry of joy and fear. . . . For he looked into the face of Jean Fitzpatrick!

Now he worked like a madman, for, even if she had escaped drowning, she might freeze to death where she lay. Stripping off his gloves, he thrust the fingers of his right hand into her mouth, and

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seized her tongue. This he pulled forward, so as to leave the air passage free. Then, roughly, he rolled her over on her face and, holding her by the belt, lifted her so that the water ran out of her lungs.

Laying her on her back again, he started artificial respiration. At the first convulsive gasp and shudder, he left her and frantically gathered wood for a fire. This time, it was no trapper's flame of chips he wanted, but a roaring blaze, which would melt the sheath of ice that had already formed on Jean's clothes, and dry them thoroughly. The whining of Mistisi told him that the dog, too, was clad in the like chill armor.

Every other minute, Donald returned, and again worked over Jean, so that, when the fire had begun to crackle and give out heat, he saw the upturned eyes swim down, and the blessed look of consciousness take the place of terrible blankness. Then, with a sob of joy, he gathered her in his arms, and laid her down in the zone of life-giving heat. Forthwith, he hurried back to his hiding-place for one of the fish.

A sound of choked weeping drew Donald again to the girl, and he saw that she recognized him now. He lifted her head tenderly, comforting her as he would a child, and presently felt her arms go round him in a desperate embrace of fear and thankfulness. After a long while of silence, he spoke.

"Jean," he said, "do you know who this is?"

"Yes," she replied simply, and he thrilled at the

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sound of the voice he loved. "Thank God, I am with you, at last," she added.

And the man felt that this one minute and her few words more than repaid all the suffering and injustice he had undergone in the weeks past. From the leaden sky, a beauty seemed to have dropped that glorified the accursed earth, the rock-like trees and the bitter, iron cold. In the springtime of his heart, he seemed to smell the fragrance of flowers, hear the music of rippling waters, and feel the caress of gentle airs.

When she was herself again, Donald cooked the fish. At this time, too, he celebrated his reunion with Mistisi who, being almost pure St. Bernard, recognized his master with such manifestations of extreme joy that, for a time, there was ground for fear as to the animal's sanity. But the dog had brains enough not to wander outside the fire-zone in his dripping condition, and stood steaming joyfully and contentedly beside Jean, his face a mask of idiotic happiness.

During the meal, Donald drew the girl's story from her.

It seemed that, after Charley Seguis had made the junction with Maria and Tom at the cabin, he had treated her with courtesy, but, firmly declined to let her go, saying that she was a most necessary person to his camp, since his fight was with her father. The following day, the party of four, herself, Seguis, and the French and Indian trappers, had started back to Sturgeon Lake. She received every attention and

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kindness from all of them. In fact, it was this that precipitated the trouble, for the Frenchman and the Indian sought her favor continually, and became insanely jealous of each other, although she treated both with coldest courtesy.

One night, when they stopped to make camp, matters came to a head. The sledge had not yet been unloaded, when the trappers got into a violent argument, and, without warning, drew their knives and went at each other. Jean screamed, and Charley Seguis leaped in to prevent bloodshed. . . . Then, the girl saw her opportunity, and seized it. She was still sitting on the sledge. With a shrill cry and a crack of the whip that lay under her hand, she started the dogs off on a gallop. Instantly, all personalities were forgotten and the three men gave hot chase. But, coming to a river-bed, the girl soon lost her pursuers in the distance, and, after traveling all night, struck across country in the general direction of Fort Severn. What had become of the three men without supplies, she did not know, but she supposed they had returned to Sturgeon Lake, as they could have done easily.

Then, Donald told his story briefly, and, when he had finished, they looked mournfully at each other.

"Dearest," said the captain boldly, "here's the situation: The supplies are in the river. Maybe, we can rescue some of the cooking utensils; but I doubt it. There's a cabin a mile from here that we can live in for the present. There's no food but fish, for we haven't any gun or ammunition, unless —"

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"No!" She shook her head. "They took the guns off the sledge before I ran away with it."

"We haven't anything to start on, dearest"—Donald grinned amiably—"except our knowledge and our nerve. We have got to carve existence out of this." He included the surrounding desolation with a sweep of his arm. "If this were only a desert island now, how easy everything would be!"

"You've forgotten one thing we have," remarked Jean with twinkling eyes.

"What's that?"

"Each other, stupid!" . . . But ere long she regretted the words.

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CHAPTER XIV

A FRIGID IDYL

ARRIVED back at the little shanty, they set about their housekeeping at once. The situation might have been delicate in other periods and climes, but here no false sentimentality clouded the grisly facts. Face to face with them stood hunger and cold, two relentless enemies. Hunger, in a land where the temperature burns up the tissues as a freight-engine on a grade eats coal, makes no truces; it sets its fangs when October comes, and tries its malignant best to keep them set until May or June.

Cold is something that persons of a temperate clime never experience. When the temperature reaches ten below zero the papers are full of it, and there is general consternation. But, here, in latitude fifty-four north, the mercury goes down to fifty or sixty below, and life becomes something that is at best only mere existence, and at worst, annihilation.

And these were the two foes that a hardy man and a delicately natured woman set themselves to defeat.

"I — I can't very well sleep outside the shanty," said Donald as indifferently as possible. "I have no tent or sleeping-bag. I should freeze to death."

The girl colored slightly, and asked:

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"Is there no way to make a partition?" The man pondered a minute, and then shook his head.

"Of course," he explained, "a wood partition is out of the question, because any real tree would break ax steel into brittle bits. However, there are the robes and blankets you traveled in. If we find we can spare one of those, we'll fix a partition — otherwise not. We can't risk freezing our faces or our bodies at night."

He spoke with a tone of genial friendliness, but there was a note of undisputable authority in his voice that silenced whatever objection the girl might have offered. Already, she began to feel that this man *knew*. He would cherish her to his last breath, but what he said she must obey, both for his sake and her own. There was no equivocation possible; he had taken command; he would give orders, which he expected her to obey promptly; he would do everything for the best. He *knew*, and she did not. Therefore, she would trust herself to him. So, she surrendered her will to his, and felt little thrills of admiration as he walked about deep in thought, planning their temporary life in this wretched hovel, which, somehow, had stolen a little of the sunshine from the snow, and become a dear and sacred dwelling-place.

Leaving her to set the place in order as much as possible, Donald returned to the river and the upturned sledge. The latter, grounding in a shallow, had stopped the down-stream drift and now, with its dead dogs, was freezing solid in the ice. With his

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knife, he chopped away around the edges, and found the pack thongs still around the sledge. Hazardous poking with a hooked branch brought the pack to light from beneath the sleigh, but it was a flat and sickly reminder of what it had once been. The flour was gone, but the tea, which had been in a canister, was unspoiled. A chunk of fat meat might prove of some value after treatment. A few battered tin dishes and utensils Donald greeted as priceless finds, and a rusted woodsman's ax sent him into a war-dance of joy. Last of all, a single steel trap came to light. He examined it closely, and discovered why it had been taken on the trip by Charley Seguis and his companions. It was broken, and no doubt one of the trappers had expected to mend it some night by the camp-fire. Just now, Donald could not tell whether it was beyond his skill or not.

Laden with his finds, he returned to the shanty, where Jean had succeeded in coaxing a fire to burn in the old stone chimney at one end. Near by lay the remainder of the fish he had caught in the morning.

"Those will do for to-night," he said, "but, after supper, I must catch some more, and look about the banks of that little river. I thought I noticed several things there this morning."

"Oh, don't go away and leave me alone," pleaded the girl, forgetting that for two nights and days she had braved the wilderness single-handed.

"We'll go together then, princess," he replied, smiling. It was now late in the afternoon, and al-

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most dark, so they set about dinner, which consisted of fish and tea. During the meal, Donald regarded Jean for a little in quizzical silence.

"I'm glad Mr. Gates, the missionary, is with your father," he said, at last.

"I'm not, particularly; he's only in the way, and wants to preach all the time, when there's fighting to be done. Why are you glad?"

"Just for the convenience of the thing, that's all. When we join the men from Fort Severn, he can marry us at once."

"Well, well, young man!" replied the girl, severely. "I can't say that we have to rush into matrimony the moment we perceive a cassock. Personally, next June at the fort, when the *brigades* have come down, and there are flowers, and so forth, I shall be more ready to talk the matter over with you." She looked at him with eyebrows lifted in mock condescension while she stirred the fish with a tin spoon.

Donald, in the first bliss of happiness realized, leaned over to kiss her, but this time the eyes that met his were serious. He took the upraised hand in his banteringly, but listened to what she said, nevertheless.

"Donald, of course we have to be a little foolish sometimes, but I must ask you to agree with me that we only be good friends after — oh, say three o'clock in the afternoon. From then on, no foolishness. It will spare us a lot."

Donald looked at the girl, keenly surprised. The

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same thought had been in his mind, but he had not dared express it for fear of having to entangle himself in impossible explanations. But, now, her woman's intuition felt the thing he knew, that love, fierce, burning, desirous, comes in the northland as well as in the tropics. With a few words, they made their rule and he dropped her hand.

"But, to return to the preacher," he resumed presently, as they had more fish, "I think it will be better for all hands, if we marry at once. This little honeyless honeymoon won't stand the strain of months, dearest, for in that time it will have been discussed from Labrador to the Columbia, and from the Coppermine to Lake Superior, and I don't want you on the tongues of men at all. I am glad you love me, for now our marriage has to be."

"But, Donald, think of father! This is the last thing in the world he will allow," Jean protested. "Why, if he thought I had such a step in mind he'd have apoplexy, I'm sure. Really, you don't know how strongly he feels about it, and about you."

"In reference to this Charley Seguis, whom I failed to bring in?"

"No, it isn't that. He disposed of that by putting you in the guard-house."

"It can't be my escape then, for he hasn't heard of that."

"No," said the girl, sitting back, her eyes troubled; "it isn't any of these things, but something else more dreadful or hurtful to you. I have tried

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so hard to learn what it is, but he won't tell me! Old Maria knows, and hinted at it —"

"Old Maria!" cried Donald, in disgust. "What can that old hag know about me? Little girl, my life has been clean, and yet these accursed rumors fly around me like a flock of hawks over a grouse-nest. Even your father, a just man in his way, will not give me a chance to prove or disprove. In heaven's name, Jean, if you know anything more tell me, and I'll run the thing to earth, if it takes all my life."

The girl lifted her calm eyes to his troubled ones, and he knew that he would hear the frank truth.

"Poor boy!" she said. "I don't know anything definite. Old Maria hinted at a stain on your life, and father, when I demanded the facts from him, said that he wouldn't tell me if he could, for it wasn't proper for me to hear them. That's all I know. But, Donald, never for a moment have I doubted you, or lost faith that you could upset this whole tissue of rumor as soon as you laid hold of it."

"Good little princess!" he said gratefully, and pressed her hand for a moment. "My conscience is clear, and, if I have your faith and love, I can fight anything. God help these breeders of slander, if I get hold of them, that's all," he added, grimly.

A little while later, armed with ax and knife, and accompanied by Jean, who carried the home-made fish-line, Donald led the way through the woods to the river that had brought him such precious freight on the tide of tragedy. That morn-

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ing while angling, his eyes had seen many things. Fifty feet from where he sat, he had observed an iced pool in which a back-set from the swift stream probably moved sluggishly. He had noticed little tracks of five-toed, webbed feet on the thin drift of powdery snow that led to the bank above this pool. Last of all, he had seen a smooth incline worn by these webbed feet down to the brink of the pool.

"Otter!" he had said to himself; and he had resolved to come back later.

Now, with crisp instructions as to silence, he advanced noiselessly, trying every bit of crust before he set his weight upon it, avoiding tufts of underbrush, and repressing his breathing. Jean, a true daughter of the North, sensed these precautions almost by instinct, and followed his example. He did not seek the fishing-hole of the morning, but rather a clump of trees on the bank back of the incline, thanking fortune that the light wind was in his face, so that the man-smell could not be carried down to the pool. With infinite care, the two approached the shelter of the trees, and, presently, when the wind rustled among the boughs, parted them and looked through.

There, on the bank, was the whole colony of otters, engaged in an exhilarating pastime. Head-first, tail-first, sidewise, singly and in groups, the little animals were coasting down the toboggan-like path they had worn from the top of the bank to the water's edge. No sooner did they roll to the bottom than they raced to the top and started all

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over again, slithering, careening, tumbling. To the girl, it was a strangely ludicrous sight, but to Donald it was familiar enough. The otters were indulging in the favorite amusement of their kind — sliding down a snow-bank.

The two observers turned away soon, and, with exaggerated care, made their way back to the little shanty, where Donald at once set about mending the broken trap. In two hours' time, he had succeeded in fixing it temporarily. Then, after wrapping Jean in her blankets and furs on the spruce-covered bunk, he rolled up in his own coverings before the fire for the night.

The next morning, Donald caught a fish for breakfast, and then returned to the otter-slide with his trap and the piece of meat he had rescued from the pack. Baiting the trap with part of a fish, he buried it in the snow at a point where the otter must come down the slide to the pool. Then, he rubbed the meat in the tracks where he had stepped, and brushed snow across them, obliterating every trace of his presence. After that, he returned to the shanty, for there was still much to be done.

On his way to the fish pool that morning, he had seen a number of sharply impressed, three-toed clusters of footprints, and recognized the tracks of the hare. Now, he searched the by-ways of the low ground in the vicinity, and finally discovered a line of undergrowth like a hedge, through which a passage had been forced. The hard-packed runway told him that here the long-ears passed through on their

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foraging expeditions. He cut a number of small sticks and planted them across this opening, leaving barely enough room for a small animal to pass. Then, he took from his pocket the string of moose-gut that had made part of the fish-line, and fashioned it into a running noose. This he hung across the opening, and tied the other end to a bent twig, which would spring up immediately a pull dislodged it from its caught position. Here, too, he carefully effaced any man-trace, and afterward went on to the second hedge, where he set a snare made of his moccasin strings. At noon, he returned to his snares, and found two strangled rabbits hanging in mid air, frozen to the consistency of granite. Releasing them, he reset the snares, and returned jubilantly to the cabin with his catch. . . . And they had rabbit stew that day.

This was only the beginning. It was food, and no more. As the days passed, Donald spent many hours in the forest, chopping saplings and underbrush for the fire, going farther and farther from the cabin in his search for the proper materials. Long since, he had chopped the broken and battered sledge out of the ice, and hauled it home. But it was damaged beyond repair, the smooth boards that made its riding surface having been broken and splintered hopelessly. But there was still use for it. With remarkable ingenuity, he fashioned a small sleigh, some four or five feet long. Then, from the harness of the dead dogs, he made trappings for Mistisi, who, apparently anxious to help in all he

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saw going on around him, took to them kindly. After this, it was easy work to gather wood, however far distant. The dog made regular round trips from the cabin to the spot where the man was at work, and shortly a great pile of wood formed a wind-break for the shanty.

Jean Fitzpatrick now attended to the fishing alone, and what they did not use for food was packed away out of Mistisi's eager reach in the preserving cold. The rabbit-snares with two settings yielded three or four of the animals every day, and these, skinned and cleaned, added to the store of reserve food.

The otter-trap worked successfully, but required repairing after each catch, so that it was scarcely worth the trouble of setting, since rabbits and fish continued plentiful. One night, however, after a series of sharp sniffs at the door while the rabbit was broiling, and the discovery of padded prints in the snow next day, Donald worked more carefully over the contrivance, and set it to catch larger game — for bob-cats were about.

The evenings, too, were busy, for the rabbit skins must be cured. Donald hewed out a wedge-shaped slab of cedar. This he spliced. Then into a pelt, with the fur side turned in, he shoved this slab, forcing into the splicing a smaller wedge of wood. Hammering this, the larger block widened, and thus stretched the skin. When the proper tautness was obtained, he fixed the pelt to another board with pegs of wood, and hung it to dry.

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Now, there were a number of these skins, and Jean wished to satisfy her longing for privacy. A tiny rabbit-bone, whittled to a point, and rabbit sinews, white and tough and secured with great difficulty, supplied the means. So, for several days, she sewed the skins together, and at last hung before her bed of boughs a heavy curtain.

Two weeks passed, and the man and girl had successfully set the vicious world at naught. Their supplies were piling up fast, and they bade fair to be comfortable all winter.

Before the fire one night, when there was no work to do, Donald pulled comfortably at his pipe, and observed the girl on the opposite side of the rude fireplace, busy with her rabbit-bone needle. Where she had seemed sweet, gracious, and gentle before, now, after their enforced intimate comradeship, his love for her was something the wonder of which he had never dreamed possible. If only a priest might come by on some evangelizing journey to the Eskimo! He would marry her then and there, and live thus until spring, or her father, came. Since their perfect relationship it seemed utterly impossible for him to exist without her.

Suddenly, with a shake, Donald jerked himself back from these dreams, and looked at her again, very sadly. The announcement he was about to make appeared all the harder.

"Jean," he said at last, "in about two days, we start back for Fort Severn."

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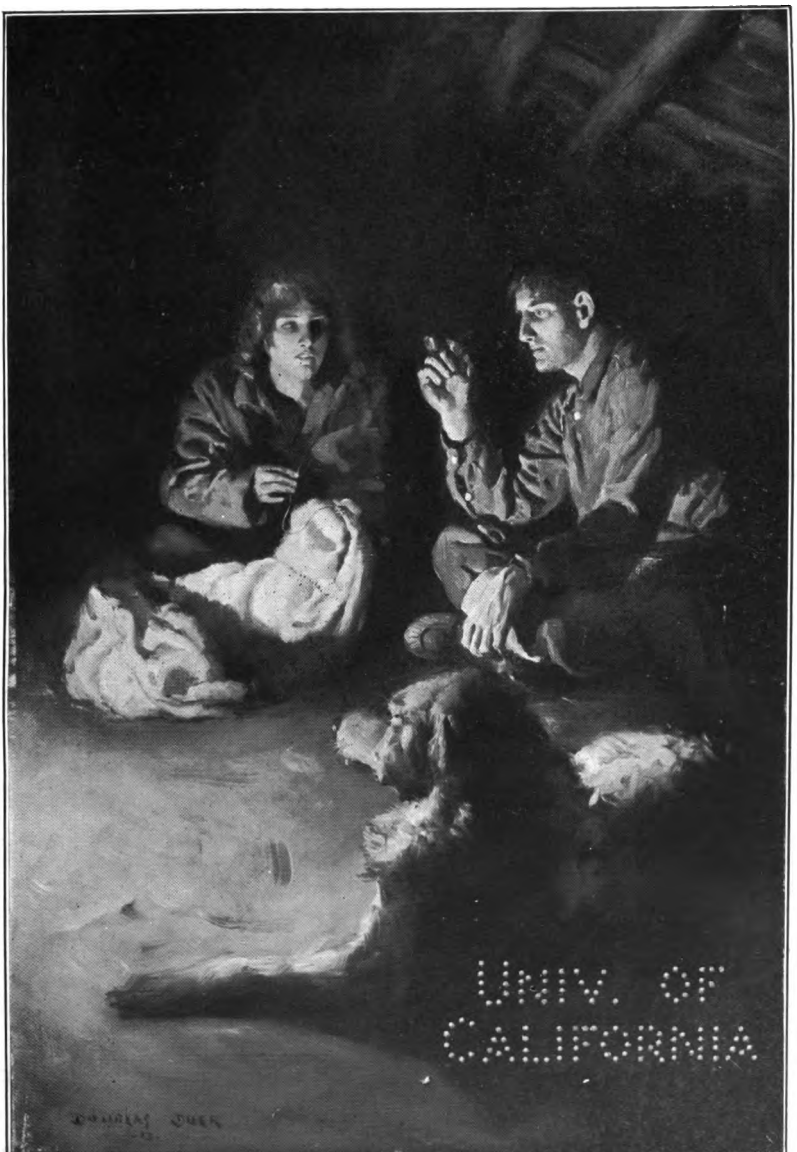

"Jean," he said at last, "in about two days we start back for Fort Severn."

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The girl raised her head, and showed a face of pouting disappointment.

"Why?" she queried. "Here, we are comfortable and safe; we are in bad shape to travel without a sledge, and the dangers are many, especially since you have no gun. Let's stay here until somebody finds us. It's been a wonderfully happy time for me. You're the dearest, bravest, most chivalrous man alive, Donald."

The lover flushed with pleasure, but his brows drew down nevertheless, and his jaw set, for the temptation was strong upon him.

"I've been very happy, too, princess," he rejoined; "but we musn't stay any longer. Before the world, neither of us would have a valid excuse. We have provisions enough now for a week in the woods, and public opinion would demand the reason for our delay. It's hard, but we've got to go."

And, with a little sigh, the girl meekly accepted the ultimatum.

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CHAPTER XV

PREY OF THE PACK

ALL the next day, the two prepared for their departure. Donald strengthened the little sledge, and made their goods into a solid pack, convenient for him to carry when Jean should become tired and need to ride. She dismantled the shack of the pathetic little gew-gaws that had been a part of her happy housekeeping, and kissed them all before she gave them into his hands for packing.

Neither was insensible of the fact that this departure meant more than the mere ending of their frigid idyl. Both realized that McTavish was deliberately going back to imprisonment and disgrace, although no mention was made of the subject. Jean had some vague notion that, ten miles from the fort, he might leave her, and retire into the woods without having been seen. The idea had also occurred to Donald, but he had put it aside unhesitatingly as the act of a coward. It little mattered to him what was his fate, as long as he knew that Jean was safe, and was near him.

That evening, the one before their departure, they held mournful obsequies over the happy two weeks that could never be repeated in their lives. They had just sat down to a dinner of rabbit (of

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which they were getting heartily tired by this time), when the sound of bells came to them, and they rushed to the door. With shout and crack of whip, a dog-train roared up from the south, and came to a steaming halt in the glow of their hearth.

After the first excitement Jean, suddenly realizing her position, had shrunk back into the farthest corner of the cabin, her face scarlet and her heart beating. Donald, to spare her as much as possible, met the man outside, and immediately there were glad cries of recognition.

"Well, McTavish, how the deuce do I see you here? You ought to be up at the fort. But, say, old man, I'm glad you broke out. That thirty-day term smelled to heaven when the old man gave it. Good for you!"

"And you, Braithwaite?" cried Donald, delightedly; for the man was an old friend — a storekeeper at the fort. "What are you doing up this way, and who are the boys with you?"

Donald was greatly surprised that the two men on the sledges did not rise.

"We've been having trouble at Sturgeon Lake — pretty rough stuff, too," was the explanation; "and these boys got shot up a little. Probably, you know 'em — Planchette and Napoleon Sky, the Indian."

"Yes, yes! You don't say! So, the Sturgeon Lake trouble has come to that point, has it? I was afraid of it. I knew those fellows were desperate. They gave me a taste to show they meant business."

"They sure did, Mac. But, say, that isn't the

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worst. The Old Nick himself is shot up, and hitting the high spots with fever. We're afraid to move him, and —"

"Wh — what's that?" asked a trembling feminine voice from the doorway. "Who did you say had fever?"

During an instant of pregnant silence, the universe stood still for all those there present. The crisis was come more quickly than Donald had expected.

"Well, by heavens, Mac," blurted out Braithwaite, "I didn't know you did this sort of — er, were away on a vaca —"

"Answer her question," commanded Donald, bluntly; "and then I'll explain."

"Oh, yes, who's got the fever? It's the governor, the boss, the factor — er — Mr. Fitzpatrick. It's not what you call dangerous yet, but the chances are good, ma'am. Yes," he added, with evident relish, "the chances are good."

The cry that broke from the girl's lips halted any further essays at humor of this sort.

"Shut up, can't you, Braithwaite?" snarled Donald. "Can't you see it's Miss Fitzpatrick, and that she wants to know about her father?"

"Not the lost one, Mac?"

"Yes, the lost one; I found her, or, rather, we met here quite by accident, with nothing on earth but the clothes we stood in, and a knife and an ax. We've been kicking along the best we could ever

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since in this cabin. That's all there is to it. Now what about the factor?"

"Well, it was this way, Mac. There was a lively little argument goin' on out front, where some of our boys were tryin' to capture some of their'n. You see, the factor thought, if we captured those fellers, and brought 'em back to the fort prisoners, it would end the free tradin'. As I say, there had been quite a little argument out front, and the factor, he didn't like the way things were goin'—got a little r'iled, as he sometimes does, you remember. We-ell, darned if he didn't start out to tell 'em how to do it, when somebody plugs him with a rifle bullet in the collar-bone, and that's the end of his fightin' for a while. Of course, he's big and heavy and gettin' old, so the fever that set in came to be the most important part of the wound, but they think he'll pull through."

"Of course, Dr. Craven from the fort is there?" queried Jean, from the door.

"Yes, ma'am, he went along with the expedition, and it's good he did."

"How is the situation down there now?" Donald questioned.

"Well, for our side, it ain't no more'n so-so," was the somber admission; "an' mebbe that's stretchin' it."

After a little more general conversation, Braithwaite, with his sick, made camp a short distance from the cabin, stoutly refusing Jean's proffered hos-

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pitality, and the two castaways once more returned inside, and took their places by the fire.

"Well, princess, that changes matters doesn't it?"

"Yes, Donald. At least it changes directions."

"What do you mean?"

"That I must go to Sturgeon Lake and father, to-morrow. Of course, you have already decided to head that way."

"Yes, but I feel that you ought to go on to the fort with Braithwaite's party, and not down into the danger zone, where anything may happen to you."

"I know it, dear boy," Jean answered, firmly. "But I can't leave father as sick as that to the tender care of a lot of fighting trappers. Can't you see my position? He's all alone there, and I'd like to know what kind of a daughter I'd be to turn my back and travel the other way!"

Donald ceased to resist, for he realized she was taking the only course open to a girl of courage and spirit.

"So, we travel southwest instead of northwest to-morrow," she mused, after a while.

"Right into the deuce's own kettle of trouble," prophesied Donald. "But now, princess, we had better turn in, for the going will be hard."

Two hours before dawn, both camps were astir. Braithwaite and Donald, both in need of something, met by the former's camp-fire, and bargained. Because of fast traveling, the sick-train had no fresh meat; McTavish had no firearms. In ten minutes,

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a goodly supply of frozen rabbits had been packed on the north-bound train, and Donald once more caressed the butt of a revolver with one hand and the stock of a rifle with the other. He had promised to return them as soon as possible, along with the pocket compass that one man had yielded up.

The queer little sled that Mistisi hauled became the object of much wit, but it held the pack well, and, shortly before sunrise, the parties waved each other farewell, as they drew farther and farther apart. Just previous to starting the trains, McTavish had drawn Braithwaite aside, and requested silence for himself and men in regard to the secret he had discovered, out of regard to Jean.

"Everything will be all right in a few days, and when we reach Fort Severn again you can talk all you wish, for then we'll have been married," Donald said. Braithwaite agreed without hesitation. He was a middle-aged man who, despite his roughness, had a great fondness for Jean; for a daughter of his, had she lived, would now have been the same age.

Mistisi, with a hoarse bark of joy, leaped into the traces so vigorously that Jean and Donald on their snowshoes had great ado to keep up with him. The wind had not yet melted the crust, and for three hours they made very fast time.

The distance to Sturgeon Lake Braithwaite had verified as being fifty miles. He had also given McTavish explicit directions where to find the camp of the men from Fort Severn, outlining the positions

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of the enemy, and describing the main features of the situation. Donald thought that, with good luck and good surfaces, they ought to make the lake that night. If not, he was prepared to camp in the woods. . . . In later years, he was sometimes asked why he waited two weeks in the cabin if the lake was only a day's journey away, and to this he replied that he was not sure of his bearings or distances, and had no firearms wherewith to protect himself from wild beasts, which at this season of the year were hungriest and boldest. That he had at last decided to go at all was only for the sake of Jean: he preferred to expose her to the teeth of animals rather than to the tongues of men.

Although he tempered the speed to Jean's abilities, by noontime Donald found the girl exhausted, and biting her lips in the effort to keep up. He at once ordered a halt, and, as quickly as possible, made a fire and tea, adding to this slender *menu* boiled fish. Not until he saw the warm color glow once more in her cheeks did he cease to ply her with food and drink.

Then, he took the light pack from the little sledge, fastened the forehead straps around it, and tucked Jean in its place. The crust had begun to melt shortly before noon, and Mistisi had broken through. Now, the pathetic animal lay down on his back and held his feet in the air, "*wooffing*" gently to attract attention. His master examined him, and found that his foot-cushions were worn thin, and that the

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membrane between the toes had broken and bled, leaving a trail behind.

Here was an opportunity to use some of Jean's primitive needle work. McTavish took from his pocket four little rabbit-skin dog-shoes, and tied them on Mistisi's feet with soft thongs of the same material. The animal, with a bark of pleasure, leaped to his feet, and was off on the trail before the man could swing his pack into place.

Then began the final stage. Donald figured that they had done more than half the distance in the morning, but the breaking crust made harder going now, and their progress was much slower. Not until the sun wheeled under the horizon would things solidify again. In the middle of the morning, they had crossed the main north branch of the Sachigo River. The middle of the afternoon should bring them to the westerly tributary that fed this branch. That passed, only small occasional streams would interrupt their progress to Sturgeon Lake.

True to reckoning, they found the west tributary, and set out for the last reach of their journey. Donald consulted the landmarks he knew, and laid their course toward the eastern shore, midway the length of the lake, the spot Braithwaite had mentioned as the camp. They still had twelve miles or so before them, and a preliminary chill gave warning of sunset. An hour before, Jean had insisted on running again, and the pack was once more on the sledge.

Although he said nothing about it, Donald was

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worried. That little trail of blood which Mistisi hal left behind furnished food for serious anxiety. Had not Jean's exhaustion given him concern at noon, he would have noticed it long before. He centered his attention upon the nervous ears of Mistisi — ears that would have the forest sounds long before his own. Unobtrusively, he used every means of increasing speed and shortening distance. . . . For an hour, they crunched over the hardening crust. The shadows that had kept pace with them commenced to grow dim. Only five miles more!

Suddenly, the ears of Mistisi twitched nervously, and from the hollow of his great chest came a gruff, questioning rumble. What was it he had heard? The mighty muscles rippled and ran under his skin as he strained at the traces, but there was no looking back.

Fifteen minutes later brought them to a broad expanse of clear snow. Three miles beyond, the forest that edged Sturgeon Lake loomed dimly. If they could but reach that shelter, the race would be safely over. Twice, Mistisi rumbled hoarsely to himself, and then growled savagely, his hackles beginning to stiffen.

"What is the matter with him?" asked Jean.

"Listen!" Disengaging their ears from the noise of travel, they suddenly heard a sound behind them, deep and faint as from a hunting dog in distant cover. McTavish paused a moment to look behind, and on the snow where it touched the forest they had left, descried a dark, moving mass,

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with dark specks flanking it to either side. Again, to them came the faint sound, an echo thrown from the resonant face of the woods.

"Wolves!" cried Donald, sharply. "And on our trail! Run, Jean, as you have never run before. If we can make cover, we're safe. . . . Mistisi, mush on, you fiend, or I'll break your back!"

But the dog needed no bidding — he had sensed the danger long since. His swift trot broke into a lumbering lope.

The man swiftly took in the situation. They were in the middle of the snow-plain. There is but one defense against wolves — fire, and here there was no wood of any sort. Only one course was open to them, to go on. Their breath steamed back into their faces in clouds; the slide and crunch of snow-shoes, and the creaking of the sledge sounded under foot. The sun had dropped below the horizon, and the early darkness had come swiftly marching down from the north, bringing in its train the fickle, inconstant beauty of the aurora. Great streamers of color shot silently from horizon to zenith, and flickered with eerie dimness across the white gleam of the snow.

But Donald did not see these things. In his ears was but one sound, the baying of the wolf-pack on the hunt. He could almost see them come, red tongues slavering between white fangs, gray shoulders rising and falling in uneven rhythm, great, gray brushes flowing straight out behind. . . . He looked back. They had gained; they traveled almost two

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feet to his one. Yet, if there were no accident it was possible he could reach the forest.

"Damnation!"

Crying to Jean to go on, he halted and stooped over his snowshoes, the slip-strings of which had loosened. In a minute, he was up again and off, sliding, leaping from hummock to hummock, glissading down the little inclines, speeding like a winged Mercury of the North. How he could run, if alone! In five minutes, he caught the dog and Jean, and accommodated his pace to theirs.

Now, the forest was a bare half-mile ahead, the pack but a half-mile behind. The baying was near now, loud, exultant, terrifying. Perhaps, the huge leader had sighted the swiftly flying figures on the snow.

"Donald! I can't go a step farther. Go on, and leave me!"

Suffocated with her own breathing, each foot seemingly lead, each muscle and tendon a hot wire, Jean stumbled feebly where she ran. Donald caught her, and halted the dog, that shook with his panting like an engine after a long run. Two seconds, and the pack was cut loose, and lay upon the snow. Two more, and Jean was on the sledge. Another, and they were away again, with the forest in plain sight now.

Fighting the hardest battle of all was Mistisi. Every steam-soaked hair along his great back was erect; every other breath was a snarl; every instinct in his fearless nature called for the struggle of fangs

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against fangs for the protection of his master — the master that had once saved his life. Big as any wolf, he was the match of any, and his nature did not take into account the odds against him.

But his master had said to mush on, in words of great emphasis; so he crushed back all the battle-fury in his pounding heart, and mushed as he had never mushed before.

There was a pause, as the wolves stopped, and rifled the sledge-pack — a brief pause filled with horrid snarls and yelps. Then, the steady, resonant baying again, louder and more triumphant, seemingly at the very heels of the fugitives. A hundred yards away the woods stood, impersonal witnesses of the struggle; three hundred yards behind, the leader of the pack fixed his gleaming green eye upon the quarry, and let out the last link in his tireless muscles.

Donald realized now what he had feared for the last half-mile — that, even were the woods reached safely, to build a fire would be out of the question. It must be a fight to the death, and he could foresee but one result. For himself, he did not mind. He had brushed with death too many times to fear its coming. But Jean! What terror must be hers, to whom the bitter truths of the forest trails were new! He only hoped she did not remember that wolves tear before they kill.

Drawing his revolver, he handed it to her, and she, without a second's wait, turned round, and fired into the thick pack. She was a good shot, and every bullet told. At the same time, Donald lifted his

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rifle, and pumped five smoking shells while he ran, pulling the trigger as fast as he could, and firing into the air, since he dared not turn.

Now, they had gained the forest, and Mistisi, responding to the cry of "chaw," swerved to the right into the shelter of a breastwork of underbrush. In a few seconds, with the brush behind them, and the upturned sledge before, they awaited the attack.

Round the point of the cover rushed the leaders, and two fell snarling beneath the mass of those that followed. In the struggle over the bodies, others fell, but the main pack swerved wide, and commenced their circling attack.

"Donald, my revolver is empty," suddenly cried Jean.

"Cartridges in my left pocket," cried the man, and the girl, with trembling fingers, reloaded the weapon, while the man held the brutes at bay.

Suddenly, from the left, a dark form shot into the air. McTavish ducked, and the wolf passed over him. But Mistisi, all his pent-up fury released, rose on his hind legs, his great mouth open, his eyes fiery. With a ferocious snarl, he met the savage attack, and his jaws closed upon the hairy throat in an inexorable death-grip.

Came a great shouting in the forest, and a score of men broke cover from the depths of the woods. The firing grew swiftly to a fusillade, and in three minutes the snow was covered with the dark forms of the wolves. The few that remained turned tail,

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In the struggle over the bodies, others fell, but the main pack swerved wide and commenced their circling attack.

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and sped silently across the snow-plain, pursued by a parting volley.

A silence followed, broken only by a death-rattle here and there on the ground; then, the sound of hysterical weeping, as Jean Fitzpatrick broke down under the reaction.

"Here you, whoever you are!" cried Donald. "Come and help us out of this." And the next minute they were surrounded, and friendly hands lifted them up.

"By heaven! It's Captain McTavish and the girl," cried a hearty voice. "Now, I guess the old man'll get well."

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CHAPTER XVI.

FEARFUL DISCLOSURES

IT was with a strange mixture of emotion that Donald McTavish approached the rough log cabin where lay Angus Fitzpatrick. The morning was one of bitter cold, and the smoke from the camp-fires hung low about the tops of trees, a sure sign of fearful frost. During the past night, he had slept as of old, his feet to a blaze, other men snoring about him. Jean had been led away as soon as they reached the camp. Their innocent, childlike play at keeping house was over; those two inexpressibly sweet weeks would never be repeated, yet their sacred associations would be forever in his mind, like some beautiful thing caught imperishably at the moment of its full expression. When would he see her again? Not even a parting hand-clasp had lightened the separation of the night before. She had gone to her father; he to the camp-fire and the rough men.

Pleading exhaustion, he had refused to tell his story in reply to eager questions. Where had he found her? How? When? The thought of even sketching to these plain-minded fellows the groundwork on which had been reared such a structure of poetry seemed sacrilege. No, he would keep silent.

At the door, a loafing trapper, smoking a pipe,

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greeted him by name. The factor, even in this wilderness, maintained some show of his rank, and demanded a guard to his dwelling. No doubt the diplomatic and silent Tee-ka-mee was inside. McTavish waited until the sentry had announced his presence, and had returned with the word for him to enter.

The interior scarcely offered fitting surroundings for the lord of a domain as big as England. Unsoftened, squared logs formed the walls, and the roof consisted of slabs and branches which, with the sifted and frozen snow, formed an impenetrable covering. In the corner away from the wind, a bunk, made soft with blankets and spruce-boughs, supported the factor.

Donald was struck by the autocrat's appearance. The old buffalo-head, with its shaggy white hair and beard, did not seem to have the poise of former times; the cheeks were hollow, and the whole body thinner. But the eyes, burning as of old, looked fiercely out from under their beetling white brows. Evidently, the grief over Jean's disappearance had eaten away the body, although the spirit burnèd like a flame, proud, strong, invincible.

Tee-ka-mee, who had just turned away from his master, greeted McTavish with his pleasant smile, and then went outside, closing the rough door. The two men were face to face.

For a little while, there was silence, as the older one pierced the younger with his glance.

"I have so much to say to you, Captain McTav-

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ish, that I hardly know where to begin," he said finally, speaking in a calm, but strong, voice. "I see you here under most peculiar circumstances."

"Yes, sir, you do, and, because of their nature, I am both glad and sorry."

"I am only sorry," came back the stern reply. "However, I have been busy thanking heaven all night that you were deserted in the right spot to drag my little girl from the water, and save her life. It was a brave act, McTavish, and I appreciate it."

"Thank you, sir. I thought I was saving Charley Seguis until afterward."

"You would have been a fool not to throw him back in the water, if it had been he." The factor's tones dripped venom like a snake's mouth at the mention of the half-breed. "But will you kindly explain to me why you broke out of Fort Severn?"

"Because I considered my imprisonment there an injustice. But that is only my feeling in the matter. There was, also, a duty side to the question. I could not remain there longer, and feel that I was a man."

"And what was this duty, pray?" The voice was sarcastic.

"The finding of J — your daughter."

"What right have you to consider yourself so duty-bound in that direction that you overturn discipline, disregard my commands, and make a laughing-stock of me?"

"Only the right of a lover, Mr. Fitzpatrick. To that right, I set no limits."

"You are very quick to find an imagined right,

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young man," Fitzpatrick said, grimly. "How about myself, the girl's father, the one who, most of all, should give up everything to such a search? Did I leave the Company's business to take care of itself?"

"No, but it is well I did, or else you would never have seen Jean again. I don't think, Mr. Fitzpatrick, that there is anything gained arguing in this circle. What else have you to say to me?"

"My daughter has told me everything," went on the factor painfully, shifting on his rough bed. "In fact, she got quite excited over your chivalrous treatment of her, while you were together. Of course I believe my daughter, and, when she tells me that you acted merely as friends, I take her word. At the same time, Captain McTavish, there does not come to my mind the slightest reason why you should have forced yourself into the same cabin with her."

Donald briefly explained the situation, outlining the treachery of Maria and her Indian son, Tom, who should, by this time, be safe in Fort Severn.

"If I had not done as I did, I should have frozen to death," he concluded.

"Better you should," cried the factor passionately, "than that my little girl should be ruined for life before the whole world."

"How will she be ruined?" demanded the young man, crisply. "No one knows the story except Braithwaite and his two men, and I think we can keep their mouths closed easily enough."

"It is impossible!" said the other. "You know yourself that Napoleon Sky's tongue is swiveled two

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ways, and is the only successful perpetual-motion machine ever invented. If we bribed them, we could be held up regularly for blackmail, and even that would fail; the news would leak out somewhere. I know these wild places; I know what rumor can do. Perhaps, the wind whispers it; perhaps, the birds carry it, or the streams call it out at night. Whatever is done, I know this: that rumor will leap across a practically uninhabited country like wild-fire, and, by the time the *brigades* come down in the spring, I could not hold my head up among the curious eyes, jerked thumbs, and tongues in cheek. What I want to know, Captain McTavish, is, what can you do about it?"

"Is the Reverend Mr. Gates in the camp?"

"Yes."

"I'll marry Jean this afternoon, providing she will have me?"

"You shall not!" cried the factor suddenly, with great fierceness, turning his fiery eyes upon the younger man in an expression of hate. "You shall not — ever!"

"Really, Mr. Fitzpatrick," replied Donald, gently, "I cannot agree to that, and I might as well tell you now that I intend to marry Jean somewhere, some time, if human effort can bring it about, and the sooner the better."

"You wouldn't dare say that to me, if I weren't laid up," hissed Fitzpatrick, his hands clenching and unclenching.

"Yes, sir, I would! I have never said it before,

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because I hadn't the right. Jean loves me, and will marry me; that is all I want to know."

"And you leave me, her father, out of it? You don't even ask my permission?"

"Why should I? You said I should never marry her. If that is your attitude, I don't care to consult you; I shall go ahead with this matter in my own way."

"Look here, McTavish!" The voice was suddenly calm, but its *timbre* held a note that drew Donald's immediate attention. "Do you realize, when you say that, that you are deliberately, and to my face, riding over all authority, not only from the Company's standpoint, but from a father's? I am talking to you now in coolness, and I ask well-considered replies. Do you realize that you are damning yourself forever in my sight by your words and your attitude?"

"I am sorry, sir," replied the other, with genuine regret; "but, in matters of this kind, I can only consult my own feelings and determinations. You ask what is impossible of me; I ask what is impossible of you. I think we had better separate while outwardly calm to avoid any more useless and bitter words."

"I am glad to know your attitude," retorted the factor, dryly. "Now, let me put to you one more question. I beseech you, for your own good and happiness, to answer it as I wish. You may have a week, if you like to think it over. I ask you, for the last time: Will you give up all hope or thought

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of ever marrying Jean? Will you promise never to see her or communicate with her again? Will you retire to your post, and stay there until I can get you shifted to the West?"

With the lover, there could be but one answer, but, for some almost occult reason, he hesitated. The tone, grave, portentous, almost menacing, the paternal, kindly attitude, the pleading that unconsciously crept through the other's words; all these gave Donald to know that some crisis was at hand. For an instant, he thought of the silent, heavy moment before the breaking of a summer thunderstorm; and, mentally, he prepared himself for some sort of a shock — what, he did not know. Then, finally, he answered the factor's questions.

"I do not need a week, a day, or an hour, to think these matters over," he said. "All I can give is a final and inclusive, 'No!' to all of them."

The factor stirred in his place, as much as his wounded shoulder would permit. All the paternal was gone from him now, and all the pleading. The eye that regarded the young man glittered balefully, and the lips were parted in a cruel smile.

"Well, sir," he cried, almost triumphantly, "I shall have to tell you then that it is impossible for you to marry Jean under any circumstances."

"Why?"

"Because, sir, you are not the legitimate son of Donald McTavish, chief commissioner of this company. You have no standing, and can inherit no money. If you are lucky, you may marry the

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daughter of a half-breed some time; but a white girl, even a poor white trapper's daughter, wouldn't have you." He stopped, and watched cunningly the effect of his words. . . . This was the sweetest moment of his life.

Donald, for his part, smiled easily. This was merely the fabrication of a feverish brain, he told himself.

"Will you kindly explain your assertion, sir?" he asked. "You haven't yet made yourself quite clear."

"I mean," said Fitzpatrick bluntly, "that, before your father married your mother in Montreal, he had contracted a previous marriage in the hunting-ground; a marriage amply attested, of which the certificate still exists. That, of course, makes his second marriage in Montreal illegal, makes him a bigamist, and you illegitimate. Moreover (and this is the best joke of all), unknown to him a son was born, to his first marriage, and that son, according to law, should inherit the family wealth and position. Now —"

"Stop! Stop! You fiend!" shouted Donald, his hands to his ears, and a look of fury on his face. "Oh, God! If you weren't lying there, if your white hairs didn't protect you, I swear to heaven I'd kill you, if I swung for it. What you have made of my mother! What you have made of her!" It was characteristic of his nature that he thought of some one else in a crisis. So it had been in his boyhood; so it was now when the structure of his life

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came tumbling about his ears, just when it had seemed for a little while most beautiful.

The triumph died out of Fitzpatrick's face, and was supplanted by an expression of fear. But few times had he ever felt fear, bodily fear. This was one of them. Yet, since there was nothing to say, he kept silent. Donald walked up and down aimlessly, until he had won some measure of control over himself, his body shuddering with the struggle. Then, he faced his persecutor.

"How do you know this?" he asked, in a thin voice he scarcely recognized as his own. "What proof have you? Where did you learn it? If you can't show indisputable proofs for every word you say, I'll have you bounded out of the Company like a dog. I'll hound you over the face of the earth. I'll never let you rest, until you drop into your grave, and then I'll keep your stinking memory green as long as I live."

Fitzpatrick smiled evilly beneath his mustache.

"And, if you do," he asked, "how about — Jean?"

Trapped by his own vindictiveness, Donald could only groan aloud.

"Jean, Jean!" he muttered in desolation of spirit, "I wish she were here now." Then, to Fitzpatrick: "You said there was a certificate. Where is it? Who has it? Who is the woman?"

"That I won't tell you."

In one bound, Donald had leaped to the side of the bunk. He seized the factor by his wounded

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shoulder, and shook savagely, growling between his teeth: "You won't, eh, you won't tell me? I'll see about that!"

The old man, in mortal agony, strove to writhe out of the iron clutch. He tried to call for help, but the pain was too great for words. Finally, a bellow like that of a wounded bull escaped from between his grinding teeth.

"Ye-es, stop — I'll tell — oh, my God — *stop!*"

Donald released his hold, and the factor, with closed eyes, dropped back, half-fainting, upon the bunk, where he lay breathing stertorously.

"Speak! Who is the woman?" Donald commanded.

"Maria, the old squaw," came the gasping reply.

"Has she the certificate?"

"Yes, I think so; I'm not sure. She had it last summer."

"And this — this son you speak of, is —?" Donald could not say the name.

"Charley Seguis."

Bewildered, distraught, blinded, Donald turned on his heel, and, groping for support, staggered from the cabin.

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CHAPTER XVII

THE COMPANION OF MANY TRAILS

INTO the minds and hearts of the folk who live their lives in the wild, there are bred certain animal traits. The good trapper learns that, like rabbit or bob-cat, he must be able to freeze into statuesque immobility at the sudden appearance of danger. Nature, who does her best to protect her children, sees to it that the trapper's costume soon resembles nothing so much as a hoary tree-trunk. And the men who tramp the wild gradually assimilate the silent, furtive ways of the intelligent forest folk. The wounded caribou drags himself to some inaccessible thicket, there either to gain back strength or die unobserved and alone. Sickness and feebleness are the only inexcusable faults of wild animal life, and offer sufficient reason for death if hunger is fierce. Unconsciously, Donald McTavish had absorbed the trait of mute sufferings from his years in the heart of nature. Not only had he absorbed it, but it had been handed down to him through generations of wilderness-loving McTavishes; it was part of his blood, just as the hatred of wolves as destroyers of fur-bearing game was part of it.

So, now, with this burden upon his heart almost greater than he could bear, he hurried through the

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camp, seeing no one, not even hearing the greetings of friends who had not spoken to him before. At his tent, he mechanically fastened on his snowshoes, and strode away into the depths of the forest with his hurt, like a wounded animal. When, finally, the sounds from the camp no longer reached him, he sat down on a fallen tree that broke through the surface of the snow. For a long while, he did not reason: reason was beyond him now. He felt as though something had been done to his brain that rendered it stunned and helpless. Even yet, he did not fully realize the thing that had come to him.

"That fiend lies, curse him; he lies, I say!" he muttered, presently.

"But yet, if it wasn't true, he wouldn't dare," was the unanswerable reply.

He knew Angus Fitzpatrick well enough to realize that the old man never took a step without being sure it would bear his weight. He had always been so. It was not likely that he would change now, particularly when there was so much at stake.

And yet, what had he, Donald himself, done? Nothing! If this accusation were true, it only reflected on his father and his father's past. The son winced at that, for he and the commissioner had always been the best of companions. He could not believe that the fine, tall, distinguished gentleman of his boyhood tottered thus on the brink of ruin. If so, that father's ideals, his training, his life, had been one long hypocrisy.

Personally speaking, this sin on the part of his

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father seemed utterly impossible to Donald. Theoretically speaking, it was probable enough, for men in the wilds were still men, with the call of nature strong in them, and it was the usual thing for young fellows in distant, lonely posts to marry the daughters of chieftains. In fact, there was not a post in all the Hudson Bay's territory of which he had ever heard but what had a similar romance in its records. And, while in Donald's generation the practise had fallen off greatly, yet in those before, it had been considered nothing out of the ordinary.

Pondering thus, at last the realization came that, although his father had done these things, yet it was he, the son, who must pay for them. Old Fitzpatrick would never dare beard the commissioner in his high lair; if that had been his aim, he would have done it long since. Why, then, had the factor withheld his bolt until now?

Because McTavish loved Jean? Possibly. That, at least, had brought the matter to a head. But there was something else, deeper, and this affair with the girl had given opportunity to strike.

Donald thought back. Now that he had a tangible motive in view, his mind shook off its paralysis and worked more easily; he was more his former self. He remembered that, when Fitzpatrick had first gone to Fort Severn, the elder McTavish had soon followed as factor at York. The former was the senior as regarded age, but the latter was the bigger man in every way. Consequently, when promotion came, McTavish had been elevated over the

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head of Fitzpatrick. As was natural with any man in Fitzpatrick's position, there must have been heart-burning and jealousy.

How much more so, if that man were narrow, choleric, and filled with a blind sense of loyalty and service? Donald had no doubt now that the old factor had hidden the gall of disappointment all these years, letting it poison his vitals until he was venom to the very marrow against the clan of McTavish. His sense of duty and reverence for office had forbade his acting against the new commissioner, personally. But, when the commissioner's son came out into the calling of his ancestors, no barriers opposed the wreaking of his long-delayed vengeance. For more than three years, Donald had been in the present district. He was convinced that during all this time Fitzpatrick had been rooting among the archives of his father's past in an endeavor to unearth something he might use. The search had been unsuccessful until late in the summer, when one of his spying Indians had produced Maria and her claim from the far-off Kaniapiskau section in Ungava.

Since then, the machinery had worked smoothly under Fitzpatrick's direction, and now the stroke had fallen. But though his own suffering must be the more intense, Donald knew that the blow had been aimed to glance from him full into the face of his father. For the elder McTavish had no higher dream in this world than that his only son should rise to honor and distinction in the traditional family profession.

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"If I am chief commissioner," he reasoned, "there is every opportunity for my son to become governor, achieve a baronetcy, and found an English line." This was the dream of his life, and he had intimated as much to Donald on their last meeting, two years before.

It was the foundation of this dream that Fitzpatrick was now prepared to sweep away. Already, the flood of rumor and ill repute was tearing at the base of it. For a time, Donald forgot his own misery in the realization of what it would all mean to his father. More clearly, now, he saw the careful plans, the perfect details, the inevitable conclusion.

"If only murder weren't against the law!" he muttered, twisting his fingers together until they cracked.

And, then, there came to him the one possible solution to the whole difficulty. He could sweep everything away by his own sacrifice. Now, in fifteen minutes, he could still these evil voices by going back to Fitzpatrick and accepting the old man's conditions, never to communicate with Jean again and to be transferred to the far West.

Never to communicate with Jean again! Never to touch her hand or her hair! Never to hear her voice! To go on thus for a week, for a month, for endless weeks and months and years — forever! heaven! He could not do it! Had he no rights? Was he to be the helpless manikin worked by every string of evil circumstance and voice of ill?

Yet, what other way was there? He could not

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wantonly haul the figure of his father down from its pedestal of blameless life. And his mother and sister! Theirs would indeed be a frightful position. No, there was no other way out.

What explanation of his desertion would ever be vouchsafed to Jean, he did not know. He would try to communicate with her before he went. It would be hard on her, this separation, particularly if reasons could not be given. She would never understand. She would go through life blaming him, perhaps, in the depths of her heart. . . . As for himself, his own future was the thing that concerned him least. He would start again, he supposed, and work up once more. Nothing mattered much, now.

Resolved to have another immediate interview with Fitzpatrick, Donald got slowly to his feet, and began to retrace his steps to the camp. He had not gone a dozen yards when a sharp voice called out, "Halt!"

McTavish swung around, and found himself looking into the muzzle of a rifle that projected from behind a tree-trunk.

But he had no sooner turned than a joyful cry rang out, and a man appeared running toward him. A moment later, he recognized Peter Rainy. Glad beyond words to see a friendly face, Donald put his arms about the faithful old Indian, and clung to him desperately, as a frightened child clings to its mother.

"Master, master, what is it?" cried Peter, amazed and frightened.

But the young man did not reply for a while.

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Then, he sat down with his comrade of many trails.

"Tell me what happened to you, first, and then I'll give you the queerest half-hour you ever had," he said.

And Rainy told his story: The night Maria struck down Donald, she did as much for Peter, but with a different purpose. No sooner had he been rendered helpless than he had been bound to one of the sledges. Then, both dog-trains had been harnessed, and a midnight march begun. Where they had gone, for days Rainy did not know, and his companions did not enlighten him. At last, one morning when it was snowing heavily, the Indians did a characteristic thing. They tied him securely to a tree with ropes, the ends of which were in the campfire. A little powder was sprinkled here and there to aid the flames that slowly crawled toward the captive. Beside him they put a rifle and some ammunition, along with a small pack of provisions; but they took both dog-trains. The idea was that, when the ropes had been eaten away by fire the falling snow would have covered the tracks of the flying pair, so that Rainy could not pursue them.

What with the fear of bob-cats and panthers, the Indian had passed a harrowing half-day, and, as soon as loosed, he started straight for Sturgeon Lake. The reason Maria had traveled around with him so long, Peter explained, was that they wanted to be sure of McTavish's death before the old trapper should be released, and could start in search of his master.

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When the narrative of danger and duplicity was finished, Donald took hold of Peter's arm.

"How long were you with my father?" he asked.

"From the time he came to York factory until he was married in Montreal. I stayed a year with him there, but found I was dying of homesickness for the woods, and had to get back to them. But I went up when you were born, and saw him and you regularly every year after that, until he was ready to send you into the woods in the summer-time."

"But before he came to York factory? Do you know anything of his life then?"

"Only hearsay. Stories of his brave deeds and big hunting on the Labrador and westward! He had a sense of game that comes very rarely; he moved with the animals instinctively, so that the best pelts were always his. And he had luck. One year, he brought in three of the six silver-fox skins taken that winter in the whole of Canada. He was a wonderful hunter."

"But, Peter, did you ever hear anything about his relations with the Indians?" Donald demanded. "Was he ever fond of a chief's daughter? Did he ever mar—?" One look at the old Indian's face stopped the question, for, caught unaware, the rising of this skeleton shook Rainy to the depths.

"No, master, no, n-o, n-n—"

"Peter, don't lie to me! You've never done it yet. I'm in too much trouble to be lied to. I know the truth now, despite your denials, so you might as

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well admit it. Didn't my father marry old Maria at one time?"

"Yes," said Peter simply. "But how did you know it?"

Then, Donald told his story in full, closing with his determination to go to the factor and accept the conditions imposed.

But, at that, Peter Rainy protested violently.

"No," he cried, "never! Put no trust in that old wolf, Fitzpatrick. Once he has got you under his heel, he'll grind and grind, until there's not as much as powder left. What good for you to go away West, eh? He'll let you get started well, and then along will come queer rumors and unexplained things about you. At last, something will drive you away, and you'll start again. Once more, you'll be driven out, and so it will go. Do I not know? Have I not seen it work?"

"But I can't resist him, and have my whole family dragged through the mud, can I?" Donald remonstrated, in despair.

"Yes, this man Fitzpatrick is bound to drag it through the mud anyway. He hasn't waited all these years for his revenge to let it slide through his hands that easily, has he, do you suppose? His whole happiness in life now rests on your disgrace and that of your family. It will come, whatever you may do, and it's much better to fight to the last wolf than put your trust in a man like the factor."

So, they talked for more than an hour, Peter

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Rainy heartening his young master in this desperate plight. The old Indian declared that a woman as malicious as Maria must have her vulnerable spot, that she might be bribed; in fact, that a hundred ways of removing the obstruction might be come at. Presently, Donald caught a little of his companion's fire, and began to warm to the project.

"Peter," he cried finally, "I'll do it on one condition, and that condition may be the death of you."

"What is it?"

"That you start to-night for Winnipeg, and bring my father North. Upon him really rests the burden of blame and of proof; if he wants to save himself and the rest of us, he must come out here and do it."

"Wisely spoken, my son. The thought was in my mind. When I arrive in Winnipeg, your father will know I have crossed the wastes for only one thing — and he will come."

"Then, you go willingly?"

"I should never forgive you, if I hadn't been sent."

"Brave old Peter!" McTavish put his arm across the old Indian's shoulders affectionately, as had been his custom when, a boy, he had gone on his first, short canoeing expeditions. "If it weren't for you, where would the McTavishes be? If we come out of this safely, you can have a house and servants of your own the rest of your life."

"I know; your father has told me that for the last ten years; but I can't stand it, Donald. My little money in your father's hands has grown big

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the way white men make it grow in banks, but I shall never touch it. The wild is too much part of me. I'd rather battle with winter's cold under an *abuckwan,* and running my line of traps, than live in the finest house in Winnipeg. Some time, when I'm old, and the winter winds shake me to the marrow, I'll build a little cabin by a fishing stream or lake, and live happily until the coming of the shadow. Many young men and maidens will look after me, for I'm rich. So, I'll never want for anything in my old age, except the sight of my master, who will then be gone from the forest trails."

"Good old Peter!" Donald exclaimed, huskily. He rose suddenly, the tears in his eyes. He fumbled with his gun uncertainly while the Indian filled a pipe. Then, he gave his directions.

They were far enough from the camp for Rainy to remain unobserved all day. McTavish would return among his companions, and buy a dog-train if he could get one, giving as an excuse the fact of his own being drowned. He would secure provisions, and meet Rainy on the edge of the camp at night. He specified where.

Both knew that to get the Indian off unknown and unseen on his long journey would be a desperately difficult thing to do, particularly as the young man would be watched; but, as the need was great, so was the determination, and Donald started for the camp with a light heart.

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CHAPTER XVIII

IN NEW CLUTCHES

FOUR hundred and fifty miles southwest of Sturgeon Lake, as the hawk flies, is Winnipeg — formerly the Fort Garry of Hudson Bay fame, and before that the Fort Douglas of battle, murder, and sudden death. As Peter Rainy expected to make the journey, the distance was nearer seven hundred miles. From Sturgeon Lake, he would strike east to the north branch of the Sachigo, and follow that down to its junction with the main river. Then, turning south, for two hundred miles, his would be a straight course up the Sachigo and through a chain of lakes that almost would carry him to Sandy Lake. Southwest, he would rush through Favorable Lake, Deer Lake, Little Trout, and unimportant waterways, until he reached Fort Alexander on a thumb of Lake Winnipeg (that three-hundred-mile terror). Discounting blizzards, he could make seventy-five miles a day down that fine waterway to the mouth of the Red River, and, from there, thirty-five miles would land him in the thriving capital of Manitoba.

Such was the course that McTavish pricked for him on a map, and the old Indian studied it all that day, until it was a part of the vast lore that lay behind his expressionless eyes.

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Night fell, and a pure moon rose out of the east, spreading a flood of light over snow-fields and through forest aisles. Peter Rainy cursed heartily at the misfortune, and, as if the sky spirits were afraid of him, a great mass of solemn clouds bulked out of the northwest, and extinguished the gay young moon forthwith. They brought with them a bitter wind and a snowstorm, so that when he finally struggled down the blast, Donald almost overran his objective point. With him were a sledge, dog-train, and provisions. In answer to Rainy's inquiries, he merely said:

"I'm on parôle, and can go anywhere, and, as for these things — I have friends in the camp!"

Loath to part with his faithful companion, he accompanied the Indian a little way on the journey, and then returned to the camp, happier and more hopeful than he had been in many hours.

Because of the storm, shed-tents had been set up, and the men were gathered under them for the night. Entering that of the trappers with whom he had camped the night before, Donald comfortably lighted his pipe, and started in to satisfy his curiosity in regard to the campaign that had already been carried on against the Free-Traders' Brotherhood. His companions, one of whom was Timmins, a clerk in the Company's store at Fort Severn, and the other a trader at the warehouse, enlightened him.

"For a week now," said Timmins, spitting into the fire contemplatively, "there hasn't been much doing. But, before that, shots popped around here

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considerable. Fitzpatrick thought, and still thinks, I guess, that the only way to nip this free-trader business in the bud was to go at it in the old-fashioned way, with bullets. So, as soon as we had a camp here, we started after those fellows. But they were ready for us, and, when it was all over, three or four of our men were wounded, and nothing was accomplished. The factor got a touch himself, as you know, and, since that, there hasn't been much doing. The old bear is trying to work out a scheme that'll finish things once and for all."

"I expect there'll be action pretty soon, won't there?" Donald asked.

"Yes, I reckon there will. Now that you've brought Miss Jean back, and the old man's mind is easy, I imagine he'll have a brand new way for us to die worked out in a short while."

"What are these fellows free trading for, anyhow? Don't we treat them right?" Donald questioned, with loyal indignation.

"Aw, sure we do," drawled Buxton, the trader; "too right, I guess. If they had the old discipline in force, I guess they'd know who was good to them. These fellers have got a grand idea of their own importance, that fellow Seguis especially, and they've bargained with a French fur company, as far as I can gather. The Frenchies have been successful in the Rockies and on the Mackenzie, and they're figuring on starting a post or so in this territory. Of course, they offer better terms than we do — more tobacco and flour and truck for a 'beaver' of fur —

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but I don't think they can make headway — at least, not against old Fitzpatrick. He's as set as a hill, as tough as an old oak limb, and as cussed as a stoat."

From time immemorial in the fur trade, all bartering has been carried on in terms of "beaver." That is, a prime beaver skin is the unit of currency between the Company and its hunters. Not long since, an otter skin equaled ten "beaver," twenty rabbit equaled one "beaver," one marten equaled two and a half "beaver"; and so on down, or up, the scale. . . . This, from the Company's point of view.

From that of the hunter, a "beaver" in trade (usually represented by a stamped leaden counter), was worth so much in merchandise — a large red handkerchief, or a hunting-knife, or a looking-glass. Two "beaver" would buy an ax, twenty a gun of a certain quality, and so on through the list of necessities.

When a hunter brings in his bales of fur, he takes them to the warehouse, where they are assorted and appraised by the chief trader, after much haggling. When the value is determined, the trader pushes over the counter as many "beaver" (lead pellets), as the furs are worth. The hunter takes these to the store, and, after much travail and advice, exchanges them for winter supplies and gewgaws that strike his fancy. In this primitive way is wrought the gigantic trade that covers woman with fur, from queens with their ermine to the shop-girl with her scraggly muskrat or rabbit.

As the talk went on around him, McTavish rec-

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ognized the old story of the free-traders, men who hunted and trapped without any definite allegiance to one company or another, and disposed of their catch to the best advantage. As he had known all his life, the "barrens" about Hudson Bay remained the only country that had successfully kept the independents at bay. There had been other attempts at intrusion, many of them; but none so well organized or determined in spirit as this present one. The old, inbred loyalty to the Company told him that free-traders must be got out of the way. As far as he was concerned, he hoped action would come quickly — he did not wish too much time by himself to think.

Finally, Timmins yawned, and suggested that they turn in. But McTavish was restless. He slipped on his snowshoes, declared he would be back shortly, and left the tent. The nervous reaction of all the excitement of the last day was in him, and he felt that he needed the physical battling and buffeting of the storm to calm the throbbing of his brain and settle him for the night. Drawing his *capote* close around his face, he bent to the blast, and shuffled along. Suddenly, he felt the nearness of a presence, and raised his head, just in time to prevent going full into the wall of a log cabin. He recoiled with a muttered curse, for there was only one cabin in the settlement, and that belonged to Fitzpatrick.

Yes, it belonged to Fitzpatrick, and now it belonged to some one else also — some one for whom longing had gnawed at McTavish's heart all day. Once, during the afternoon, when he was secretly ar-

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ranging for Peter Rainy's supplies, he had seen her at a distance, and she had waved to him, happily. What did she know? he wondered. Had her father done his worst, and told her? Now, his arms yearned for the feel of her slim, straight body; he yearned to hear her voice, to look into her face.

Suddenly, some one bending to the storm as he had done, bumped full into him, and he heard a sweet voice:

"Oh, I beg your pardon!"

"Jean!" he cried joyously, and she raised her head.

"Donald!"

The next instant, she was in his arms, clinging to him with an abandon of passion he had never suspected in her. It thrilled him from head to foot. Presently, he led her from the proximity of the cabin to the shelter of a large tree at the edge of the camp.

"Oh, I couldn't sleep; I couldn't even try, so I told father I was going to take a turn or two down the main 'street' of tents," she cried, in answer to Donald's question. "And to think of meeting you! I'm so glad!"

"Are you really glad, princess?" he asked, trying to pierce the gloom and the storm to see the expression of her face. "Hasn't he told you?"

"Who told me? What?"

"Your father. This morning, he and I had a very unpleasant interview, in which he opened up all his big guns. He finally silenced me entirely. What

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the trouble was, and what influences he brought to bear, I can't tell you, Jean. If he wants you to know, he'll tell you. It is his object to ruin me in your sight. He has the facts, and, I fear, the proofs, that make marriage between us almost an impossibility; at any rate I'm sure your father would shoot me before he would let the event take place."

"Oh, what is it, Donald? You frighten me!" cried the girl. "You frighten me with these indefinite hints and uncertainties. I beg of you to tell me what the trouble is. I'll stand by you through anything. Do you suppose I care whether my father will allow us to marry or not? No, no, Donald; I think for myself now, as you once said I should. Perhaps, I think too much. I — I —"

"What do you mean, dearest?" The girl had stopped, as though embarrassed.

"I mean — I know you'll be ashamed of me, I mean — couldn't we, to-night — Mr. Gates is in camp, and he will —"

"Marry us?"

"Yes, Donald." And she hid her face against him, a face that flushed hotly and excitedly.

He caught her close during a delicious moment, for the storm held a privacy that was almost impenetrable. Then, with a groan, he released her.

"Jean," he said earnestly, "I can't do it. I would sell my soul to marry you to-night — yes, actually sell it to the devil; but, as a man who pretends to be honorable in his dealings, I can't. Oh, it simply kills me, this refusal; but the fact of it is

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that I love you too much to risk your future happiness."

"Oh, boy, boy!" she cried pitifully. "What can be happiness for me but the having of you always? If you've done wrong, I want you. Whatever this awful thing is that is ruining our lives, I don't care. I only know one thing, and that is *I want you!*"

Had he known women as some men know them, Donald would have taken her tone and her passion as passports to heaven, and hunted up the fat and spectacled Mr. Gates then and there, and this story would have ended. But he did not. He was straightforward and unsophisticated in a manly way, and knew his duty; and he also knew it was not now that Jean might regret her step, but at that important point of life Pinero has so aptly named "mid-channel," when the fire of youth has burned out, and the main concern is with the ashes remaining.

So, with the perfume of happiness in his nostrils, he put the temptation from him, and told Jean over and over that she must believe him to be acting for the best when he laid their lives out on such lines of misery. And she, after a while, believed, as he desired, and asked no more. Then, he told her that to know the things against him would make her still more unhappy, since they were not of his doing.

"You'll hear many things about me that are not true, and never could be," Donald said at the last; "but don't believe them. For I have done nothing wrong. All I ask is your faith and trust in me. With them, I'll willingly go through the valley of

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the shadow, that in the end, some time, somewhere, we may be happy."

"Those you shall have always," was the reply; "and something else, too, whenever you want it."

"What is that?"

"A wife."

He kissed her full upon the lips, and reluctantly let her go.

Through the storm a faint, muffled report sounded, as though a rifle had been fired; the two listened intently. But they heard nothing more, and Donald miserably watched Jean push open the rude door of the little cabin. Only when Fitzpatrick's voice sounded did he turn away.

Next morning, the sky had cleared, and there was a considerable show of activity in the camp, as though some secret orders had been issued. The men had not much more than finished breakfast when a trapper, who had been out still-hunting game at sunrise, came running in at the top of his speed, waving his rifle over his head. No sooner was he within reach than he was surrounded by a circle of the curious.

"There's the deuce to pay for somebody, boys," he cried, "for I just found the body of Indian Tom, old Maria's son, out there in the woods. A bullet hole in the back did the trick. He was carrying a gun, but it's still loaded and his cartridge-belt's full, so he couldn't have done the job himself. I reached him just as he rattled off, so it wasn't very long ago. Now, I don't know who had it in for him. He was 'way beyond the sentry lines, and we're twenty miles

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from the other camp. . . . I wonder if any of the boys were out in the woods last night?"

Donald, who had not heard the first of the speech, caught the last sentence, and made inquiries. When he learned the facts, he laughed shortly.

"Well, boys," he remarked, "I was out in the woods last night; in fact, I heard the shot that finished Indian Tom off."

"Out in the woods? What were you doing out in the woods in a storm like that, McTavish?" someone demanded.

Donald hesitated, and bit his lip with vexation. He was trapped. It was next to the last thing in his mind to let Peter Rainy's departure and goal become known, and it was the last to let Jean's name be brought into any of his doings. But he was not a good liar, and he groped frantically for an adequate answer.

"Come on — out with it! Is it so hard to remember?" drawled Buxton.

Still, Donald could not say anything. He laughed uneasily, and a flush mounted to his hair.

"I guess, boys," he finally blurted out, "I'd rather not say; it was a private matter."

The men looked at one another, and were silent. Finally, one, bolder than the rest, cleared his throat.

"Didn't you give Tom an awful thrashing a little while back?" he asked, significantly.

The flush became deeper on McTavish's face.

"It's none of your darned business, my friend," he replied, acidly. "But I'll answer your question. I

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did give him a good licking, and he deserved it. How did you find it out?"

"I dunno. It's just one of those things that drifted in. I couldn't tell you now who sprung it. But I'm mighty sorry you did it."

"Why?"

"Because, Captain McTavish, there is nothing to do but hold you on suspicion. That's the least charge that can be made against you. Andrew, go tell the factor what's happened, and say we'll bring McTavish in shortly."

"Look here, boys, you're not going to try and put that Indian's death on me, are you?" Donald cried, aghast.

"Sorry, Mac; but what you yourself have admitted is enough to lock you up, accused of murder in the first degree."

"Heaven!" groaned Donald to himself. "Can anything else come to me?"

A little later, as he looked down upon Angus Fitzpatrick, lying on the bed of boughs, it seemed as though the old man had had a turn for the worse. Donald recalled his grip on that wounded shoulder, and smiled inwardly with pleasure, for his spirit was still bitterly vindictive.

"Really, McTavish," was the factor's firm greeting, "I never knew any one to come up before me as regularly and for as many varieties of crime as you do. Too bad you don't devote that splendid ingenuity to something worthy."

Donald smiled pleasantly, and inquired after the

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injured shoulder, a question that turned the old man's sarcasm into fury, for he had scarcely slept the night before, what with the pain of his wound, and the nervous shock of the day.

"Well," he snarled to the others, "what brings him here now?"

A spokesman told what had already occurred outside, and Fitzpatrick listened intently. With a few rapid questions, he made certain that Indian Tom could not have perpetrated the deed himself, either purposely or accidentally. Then, he turned to the accused.

"Just where were you when you heard the shot, as you claim?" he inquired, curtly.

Donald declared he had been at the edge of the camp, naming a certain spot, and the man who had found the body identified the place as well within gunshot of the scene of the tragedy.

"Do you believe," Fitzpatrick asked the hunter, "that a shot from the tree where McTavish was could have reached and killed Indian Tom?"

"There's no doubt of it, sir."

"Now, Captain McTavish, do you admit having had a personal encounter with this Indian not long since?"

"I do." And Donald detailed the incident, ending with this remark: "It would seem to me only ordinary common sense that Tom should go gunning for me, and not I for him."

"Yes, but a great many people, when they know an Indian is on their trail, prefer to end matters

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themselves, rather than live in constant suspense and fear."

"I have yet to live in suspense or fear of any man," returned Donald significantly.

"Now, Captain McTavish," the factor said, "will you please state what took you to the edge of the camp last night during a storm of such fierceness?"

"It was a private matter, solely, and I do not care to divulge it," was the unsatisfactory reply.

"More may depend upon this than you think," warned the factor, pawing at his beard with the old, familiar gesture. "I advise you to tell."

"I refuse to do so, but give you my word of honor that I had no thought of Tom in mind. In fact, I had forgotten all about him. But I did hear the shot. It was not very distant, and I was not sure what the noise was. I waited for another, but none came."

For another half-hour, the factor grilled his victim for further information. But in vain. Then, furious at his failure, he ordered McTavish placed under guard without parôle, and in the next breath commanded a second log cabin to be built as a jail wherein to confine the prisoner.

"You have defied me long enough, McTavish," he snarled, his eyes gleaming with an ugly light, "and, by the eternal, you shall pay for this. I'll make an example of you that the North country will not forget in years. Already, you deserve punishment for breaking out of Fort Severn; this is the last

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straw. We'll see whether the Company can be set at naught by every underling in its employ."

"What do you intend to do?" Donald asked.

"I shall try you on this charge of murder."

"How can you try me on such a charge when you are here avowedly at war? Tom, being the half-brother of Charley Seguis, naturally is an enemy. Men at war can't be tried for murder, if they kill an enemy."

"Indian Tom wasn't killed in battle; he was far beyond our sentry lines. Your technicality has no weight," retorted the factor, grimly. "I am resolved that this crime shall not go unpunished, just as I am resolved that Charley Seguis shall pay the penalty for the death of Cree Johnny, if I can ever lay hands on him. You shall have a fair trial, as is your due; but justice shall run its course."

"How soon will this travesty take place?" asked McTavish bitterly.

The factor restrained his temper with difficulty.

"As soon as possible," he declared savagely. Then, turning to the others present, he ordered: "Take him away."

Already, outside, Donald could hear men attacking dead trees with their axes for material to build the little cabin that was to be his prison. His heart sank, for he felt instinctively that the shanty would be his last earthly habitation. At length, the factor had found what he wanted — an opportunity of legalizing the murder for which his heart lusted.

Donald's morbid fancy could see the skeleton of

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the gibbet and the hollow square of witnesses. He could feel the rope scratching his neck. He could both see and feel, most hideous of all, the piercing triumph in that dread hour of Fitzpatrick's gimlet eyes.

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CHAPTER XIX

A FORCED MARCH

CHARLEY SEGUIS entered the council chamber of the huge log house in the free-trader's camp at the lower end of Sturgeon Lake, and looked about him with satisfaction. Now, the square, bare-floored room could scarcely hold the men when he called them into meeting because of the bales of fur that were piled everywhere.

It had indeed been a successful winter for the free-traders, notwithstanding opposition; and, as is the case in so many new enterprises, there had been an enthusiasm and devotion to the cause that had given speed to snowshoes and accuracy to the aim of rifles. The catch was extraordinary.

Passing out into the open again, he met one of his men.

"The Frenchies ought to be here with their supplies pretty soon, chief," the latter remarked; "we're running mighty low on flour and tea and tobacco."

"I expect them any day," was the reply. "Can we hold out a week longer?"

"No more than that, and, even so, we'll have to go on short rations."

Although the situation was as yet not grave, it gave Seguis some concern. The negotiations with

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the French company that had bargained for the free-traders' furs were, this first winter, carried on under difficulties, for the company had not as yet been able to build a post for regular trading.

Arrangements had been made, however, to send a great dog-train of ten sledges north, loaded with supplies, that the hunters might replenish their failing stores. Because of the unsatisfactory trading arrangements, the men had not ventured far afield; and, now, because of the shortness of staple food, they had gathered at the settlement to restock before circling out on the hunt again. The opportunities for game at this time were the worst in the winter. Moose had "yarded up"— that is, gone into winter seclusion in some snowy corral farther north — and bears were enjoying their five or six months' nap beneath cozy tree-roots and five or six feet of snow. Caribou, always hard hunting, unless "mired" in deep snow, were few and far between.

The only real source of fresh food was the lake, where a number of men were constantly employed fishing through the ice. And even this was unsatisfactory, because a considerable amount was needed to keep so many men and dogs supplied. There was, however, an air of contentment and satisfaction in the camp, and the men waited patiently, though hungrily, for the arrival of the trains from the south.

When the commissary had left him, Charley Seguis's brow clouded with annoyance as he saw a bent, wizened female figure approaching him. The only woman in the camp, old Maria, had not fallen into

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obscurity for a moment. She always wanted something, and haggled and nagged until she got it. Seguis, the sterling white blood ascendant in him, could not always find the pride for her in his heart that a mother might wish of her son. Now, she fawned upon him and whined.

"Are you a man or a stick," she complained, "that you let the blood of your brother go unavenged? It's nearly three weeks since some coward shot him, and you haven't made a move to find the guilty man."

"Nor will I, until the business here is settled," Seguis retorted, in a tone of finality. "Do you expect me to leave this camp when the traders are expected, and go on some wild-goose chase out of personal revenge? For my part, I think Tom would have been sorrowed over a little more if he hadn't been such a fool. Why he went gunning for McTavish out of pure spite, I don't see. We need every man we can get in this camp."

Seguis was a remarkably fine-looking half-breed. He had the proud carriage and graceful movements of the Indian, combined with the bright eyes and more attractively shaped head of a Caucasian. His hair was smooth and black, but lacked the coarseness of his mother's race, while his brain and method of thinking were wholly that of his father. With this endowment there had come to him, early in life, an aspiration to rise above his own sort, a desire to be a thorough white man. And in this he had always been supported by his mother, who, knowing her

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past, carried in her heart bitterness fully the equal of Angus Fitzpatrick's. It was only when her elder son had reached manhood, and bore easily, as by right, the manners of the superior race that the idea of carrying him upward ruthlessly had come to her.

Catherine de' Medici placed three successive sons on the throne of France. Old Maria was less ambitious, but none the less unscrupulous, and her methods revealed an uncanny natural knowledge of diplomacy and statecraft. Her whole life was bound up in the achievements of Charley Seguis, and she rarely, if ever, considered the question of personal perquisites should her schemes result successfully. She was content to be the background of his operations; and the background of a picture, although it be subordinate to the main object, rarely goes absolutely unnoticed.

The strangest part of her plan lay in the fact that as yet Seguis was totally unaware of his parentage. In the cunning scheme she had evolved, it was her intention to remove Donald McTavish completely, though unostentatiously; then could come the great revelation and the noise of conquest. Reasoning thus, she had taken her story to Angus Fitzpatrick, anxious, hesitant, and fearful. But in him, to her great joy, she had found an arrogant and eager, ally. This had been during the summer. It was now the first of March, and time was flying. The work must be completed before the spring thaws. The loss of Tom was not the grief to her that she

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made pretense it was. Her references to it this morning had a deeper purpose. She continued the conversation, despite Seguis's tone of annoyance.

"Tom may have been a fool," she croaked, "but you're hardly the person to say so. Perhaps you'd have changed your song, if he'd put that dog, McTavish, out of the way — curse his charmed life!"

Seguis laughed harshly.

"You did your best, and Tom did his; I suppose it is up to me next. But why do you imagine I would be so glad if the captain was disposed of? I've nothing against him."

"No? What's the matter with you? You're as soft as a rotten tree! What were you hanging around Fort Severn for all last summer, without a look for the Indian girls? Why were you singing love-songs under the trees of nights? Why did you cease to eat, and carry around a face as long as a sick fox's, eh? Ah, you are angry, and you shift! And, yet, you ask me what you have against this McTavish! With him out of the way, there's no reason why you shouldn't —"

"Hush, hush, mother! There are men coming. Don't talk so loud!" Seguis moved uncomfortably. "Leave me, now. There's some truth in what you say. I'll think it over."

Old Maria, bent and shriveled, hobbled off, croaking, to hide the expression of malignant triumph on her leathery face. Her words had bitten deeper than Seguis cared to admit, even to himself. The short summer months, the hunter's love- and play-

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time, had been a season of misery for him, because of Jean Fitzpatrick's pure and beautiful face. Subconsciously, he knew that in mind and spirit he was her equal; the white strain in him, which now governed all his thoughts and actions, felt the call of its own blood. Hence, it had been with sad, rather than bitter, feelings that he witnessed Donald's courtship of the girl. More fiercely than ever, he realized the limitations of his kind. The bar sinister was a veritable millstone around his neck which dragged him down to a level he abhorred.

It was with a kind of gnawing hopelessness that he had gone away from the fort in the fall, and endeavored to forget his misery in the thousand activities of the free-traders' brotherhood. For McTavish personally, he had always retained a strong feeling of friendship, as was shown on the occasion of sending the Hudson Bay man forth on the Death Trail. But, now, the old hunger returned strong upon him at his mother's words, and he resolved to give himself every opportunity for contemplation of the dangerous theme.

Night came without the appearance of the looked-for French supply-trains, and, as usual, the camp retired early. As many of the men as possible used the small rooms in the great log house, which occupied two-thirds of its length. It was in one of these that Donald had been confined during his stay among the free-traders.

A high wind was blowing, and it was intensely cold. Suddenly, during the most terrible hours of

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the night, a frightened cry rang through the camp. Men, with heads and faces buried under mountainous blankets or in sleeping-bags, did not hear, and the shivering wretch who had tried to give the alarm ran frantically from room to room, rousing the sleepers. Those who were sheltered by shed-tents awoke to see a rosy light spreading across the snow where they lay — a light that was not the aurora. Then, upon the rushing wind sounded an ominous roar and a mighty crackling. The great log house was afire, and the wind exulted in the flames, tossing them back and forth and upward with fiendish glee. Shouting hoarsely, the trappers leaped, wet and steaming, out of their covers, and ran to the conflagration.

How the blaze had started was no mystery, for, in the little rooms the men occupied, each was permitted his tiny fire for cooking. Perhaps, the uneasy foot of a sleeper, perhaps a gust of wind between the chinks, had sent an ember underneath the inflammable logging of the walls.

Charley Seguis, although heavy with slumber, was among the first to run out of the building. In an instant, he took in the situation. With a lake like rock, and but one or two buckets, it was utterly impossible to check the flames with water; one or two men were making a desperate attempt to throw snow on the fire; but the wind whirled this away as fast as it was shot into the air. The building was doomed.

"Save the furs! Save the furs!" Seguis commanded at the top of his voice, and set an example by plunging into the council chamber, to reappear in

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a moment with two small bales of pelts. Instantly, the others followed his example.

Fortunately, the fire had started at the opposite end, so there was a fighting chance to save the valuable skins, although the flames were leaping along the beams with lightning rapidity. Presently, it was seen that the crowding of men endeavoring to pass in and out at the same time would be fatal to the contents of the wareroom, and Seguis, with a few rapid commands, formed a chain from the interior to a point well beyond the danger zone. He himself took the post of hazard in the midst of the piled pelts, and with quick thrusts of his arms kept a steady stream of bales flowing.

Such men as could not get on the pelt-brigade, he soon had rescuing bedding, traps, and other valuables from the little rooms, some of which were already seething infernos.

Urged by the high wind, the flames licked hungrily at the dry logs, and presently such a terrific heat radiated from the fire that the snow fled away in tiny rivulets, and the iron ground was laid bare. Fast as they worked, the men could not outspeed the devouring element. Flying embers clattered upon the tindery roof, and in a moment the whole top of the long structure was ablaze.

Charley Seguis, grabbing bales and passing them with both hands, suddenly brushed a six-inch ember from the pack of otter in front of him with a curse, and looked up. Here and there spots of fire dropped among the furs. He said nothing, but re-

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doubled his efforts. In fifteen minutes, three-quarters of the work was done, and the drops of fire from above had become a steady rain.

"Get the chief out of there!" yelled someone. "The walls will fall on him!"

The man who was standing next the entrance shouted to Seguis, but all he got was a round cursing and a command to stay where he was. The half-breed was fighting now for more than a few bales of furs; he was fighting for the very existence of the free-traders. For, should their skins be lost, their value as an organization would be gone; and gone, too, all the labor of months, with its accompanying intrinsic worth.

Now, there were but twenty bales left; now, but fifteen. Seguis's hands were raw from burns, his fur cap smoldered in half-a-dozen places. But the man at the door was brave, and Seguis kept on. Ten — five! Could he hold out? Three — two! One! . . . Swearing horribly with agony, drenched with perspiration, Seguis burst out of the narrow doorway just as the walls collapsed inward from both sides.

Quick hands wrapped blankets about him, and beat out the fire in his cap. Still holding the last bale in his hand, he stood grimly, watching the destruction of the only free warehouse within five hundred miles. Higher and higher the flames mounted; the circle of men was driven slowly backward by the fearful heat; the surrounding snow was eaten away for fifty yards on every side.

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Some activity was necessary lest the flying brands do damage to the shed-tents and the priceless bedding, but the work required only a few hands.

"Well, thank heaven, we saved the furs!" exclaimed the chief, at last.

"You saved 'em rather," said a voice admiringly. Seguis interrupted, roughly.

"Tell the cook to make a couple of buckets of tea, and serve it around as soon as possible."

"Pardon!" said the functionary referred to; "but there's no tea, or any other kind of provision in the camp. What little stock remained was stored in the far end of the building where the fire took hold first. I tried to get to it, but it was no use. There's no food."

This was a serious state of affairs, for without his eternal hot tea the woodsman is almost as wretched as though tobacco had ceased to grow. And, now, it was almost a matter of life and death, for the men were mostly without shelter, and worn out with their long struggle. Charley Seguis walked up and down briskly for a while, thinking. The fire tumbled in upon itself with a great roar and geyser of sparks, throwing distant trees and forest aisles into quick relief. The first indications of dawn, almost obliterated by the brilliance of the blaze, now made themselves definitely evident. A few of the men, with rough fishing-tackle and axes, had already started toward the edge of the lake for the morning's catch.

Seguis watched them with somber eyes, pausing for a moment in his walk. Fish, fish, fish; nothing

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between starvation and life for forty men except that staple of fish. And suppose the French traders did not get through! Suppose something had gone wrong in that five hundred-odd miles to civilization!

Where, then? Where in this wilderness could he turn for abundant supplies easily secured — except one place. A grim smile set his face into hard lines. . . . Yes, he would go there. His mother's words of the day before returned to him. Perhaps he would see *her!* He called a man to him.

"Tell the boys to get ready to march. I'll leave five here to guard the furs. The rest of us are going up to the Hudson Bay camp, and get food. If we don't, we'll starve to death, or get scurvy, or something. Tell everybody to be ready at ten o'clock."

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CHAPTER XX

AWAITING THE HANGMAN

STRETCHED on a rough bed of blanket-covered branches, in a low, squat log cabin, a man lay smoking his pipe, and conversing in snatches with two other men who sat by the door, also smoking pipes.

The man on the bed was not yet thirty years old, but his face was furrowed with lines of care — not only lines of care, but of character. The hair about his temples was sprinkled with gray, a fact that added to the dignity of his countenance. In his whole attitude, as he lay, there was a certain masterful repose and self-confidence, an air of peace and understanding that sat well upon him.

The men at the door, on the other hand, were nervous and miserable, and shifted their positions uneasily now and again. A small fire burned in the middle of the room.

"What time is it, boys?" asked the man on the bunk.

"Three o'clock, Mac," replied Timmins, pulling on his watch with fingers that shook, and straining his eyes in the dim light.

"Four or five hours more. That's what I hate,

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this waiting. I'll be mighty glad when I hear the steps outside."

"Don't, Mac, for heaven's sake!" muttered Buxton hoarsely, his languid drawl gone for once. Then, he burst out: "McTavish, I can't stand this — this thing that's going to happen. It's murder, that's what it is! Why don't you tell all the circumstances of that night Indian Tom was killed?"

"It wouldn't get me off, if I did. Can't you see that Fitzpatrick is going to get me, even if he has to do it with his own hands? I did tell about going to Peter Rainy in the woods, and it only strengthened the circumstantial evidence. If I told of the other person I was with when the shot came, it would only draw out a flood of revelations, and not in the slightest change the verdict. Besides, it would bring at least half-a-dozen people to their graves in shame and sorrow. No, Buxton, even if I could get myself off, I haven't any right to do it."

Donald lighted his pipe again and fell into a somber reverie. For two weeks now, he had been in his cabin, awaiting the end. The men that sentenced him to death had ordained a fortnight in which he might change his mind, and save himself, if he would. Now, this was the finish. He sighed with relief. Then, a tender light came into his eyes. Only the day before, Jean Fitzpatrick, white and still with pain, had come to him, and had begged him, on her knees, to save himself at her expense.

"If you don't confess that I was with you that

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night, I'll do it myself," she had cried, beside herself.

And he had answered:

"Princess, if you do, I'll deny it."

But even that had not convinced her, and she had risen with a firm purpose in her mind. Then, in the supreme renunciation of his life, he had told her everything; that he was a nobody, according to law; that her father was merely working out to a triumphal conclusion the revenge he had plotted so many years, and that there was but one way of cleaning the slate, which bore the writing of so many lives.

"When your father has done away with me I think he will be satisfied, for my father's heart will be broken and all the ambitions that have carried him to where he is will fall to ashes. I have a mother and a sister — ah, they would love you, my mother and sister! — and think what these revelations would mean to them. Disgrace and dishonor!"

"Donald, what about me?" she had cried, weeping. "You haven't thought about me. You speak of your father and your mother and sister, but you haven't even mentioned me. Am I nothing to you? Oh, forgive me! I don't mean that! But, Donald, if I lose you, I shall die, too. Don't you see I can't live without you? You found me a girl innocent and ignorant of life, and of men. You were a good man, and you gave me a good love. And I gave you my love, the love of a grown woman, suddenly on fire

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with things I had never suspected before. Love can't come to me again. Oh, can't you think of me? And yourself! Haven't you the desire to live life to its greatest fulfilment? Can you give me up this way?"

Utterly selfish was her grief. But it was the innocent, instinctive selfishness of the wild thing robbed of its due. Hers was a nature as strong in its renunciation as in its seeking, but she had not come to renunciation yet. . . . She stroked his head, pushing back the fur cap that he wore.

"Oh, my lover, my boy, your hair is streaked with gray! Oh, my poor darling!"

He smiled wanly.

"That," he said faintly, "came after I had thought of you — and given you up!"

Then, the greater woman awakened in her, the woman that has drawn man's head upon her breast to comfort him since the world began; the woman that has borne the sons and daughters of the earth amid pain and fear and ingratitude; the woman that has ever stood aside, alike in right and wrong, that the man may achieve his destiny.

So, then, stood Jean Fitzpatrick in sight of the trimmed tree-limb that was soon to bear the body of him whom she knew to be hers. Her weeping was stilled, and the eyes that looked into the eyes of Donald McTavish bore alike the pain and the glory of woman's eternal sacrifice. And to them both came the sense of peace that follows a bitter struggle won. They talked a while of intimate, tender things, and then she left him.

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"Look at him, Timmins," whispered Buxton in an awed whisper. "Did you ever see a face with such glory in it all your life? He's seen something that you and I will never see, here or hereafter!"

Timmins looked. . . . The light gradually died out before his eyes.

"What time is it, boys?" asked Donald.

"Four o'clock, Mac," answered Timmins, glancing with difficulty at the watch that shook in his fingers.

"Let me have my pencil and note-book, will you? I want to write a letter or two." The men hesitated, and the condemned man smiled. "Oh, you needn't be afraid I'll try any funny business at this late date. I give you my word, and that's still good, isn't it?"

"It sure is, Mac," said Buxton, and he brought him the articles required.

When the prisoner had begun to write awkwardly by the flickering light, the men engaged in a whispered conversation.

"Say, Mac—" Timmins began hesitatingly, and paused. Then, abruptly, he continued boldly: "I've got a proposition to make you."

"What is it?"

"Buxton and me have agreed it's the only fair thing to do. You take my revolver, and bang us both over the head with it, and make your get-away. We'll frame up a good story of a desperate struggle, and all that, to tell 'em when we come to. Then, nobody'll suffer, and we won't all have murder on our

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souls. But give us time to fix the story up beforehand," he concluded, whimsically. "You see, we mightn't be able to think alike afterward."

Donald actually laughed.

"It's no go, boys," he said gratefully; "but I'll always remember your —" He halted blankly, and Buxton cleared his throat viciously, and spat into the fire. The fact that "always" consisted for him of perhaps four hours, at most, occurred to the man about to die with something of surprise for a moment. Then, he went on writing.

He had just sealed a letter, and given it to Timmins, when he thought he detected a noise outside the cabin. Whether it was a step or a gruff whisper, he could not say. He listened curiously. Who should be about at this hour? Surely, it was too early for the —

"I wonder, do they keep their grub in this shack?" came the whisper of a man, speaking to a companion.

Where Donald lay, with his ear almost against the logs, the voices were distinct through the chinks, but did not reach the two guards at the door. He remained silent. There was a sound of breathing, and then stealthy steps, as the men pursued their investigations along the walls. What should he do? Who were they? If he spoke, he might precipitate some calamity of which he had no inkling. Thinking hard, he could reason out no situation in the camp that would call for men to be slinking about looking

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for food. Besides, every one knew that the little cabin was not a storehouse.

Knowing their man and sure of their own ability to cope with any situation that might arise, Timmins and Buxton had not been over-careful in making the door of the cabin fast. At best, the bar was only a piece of wood that turned on a peg, and its main use was to keep the door tightly closed on account of the cold draft that entered every crack. McTavish had been under guard since the morning of his arrest, and the watchers were grown careless. Now, the piece of wood was not turned full across the edge of the entrance — in fact, it just managed to keep it shut. A good stiff pull would —

There was a jerk at the outside handle, a cracking and scraping of wood, an icy blast set the little fire roaring. An instant later, a long gun, with a muffled face behind it, appeared and covered the three men.

"Here, you in the corner, get up, and let's see who you are?" said the man with the gun, and Donald, before that uncompromising barrel, stood.

"Well, by the great Lucifer," came the soft oath, "if it isn't McTavish!"

"What do you want?" demanded Donald; "and who are you?" He resented this intrusion. The time for letters was growing less and less.

"What, don't you recognize me?" The man thrust his head forward, and worked his face out of the *capote* that covered the features. It was Seguis.

"Well, this is luck," the half-breed was saying

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to himself. "All I have to do now is to take him out of here, and the coast is clear for my own operations."

He said a few words in Ojibway, and a couple of men appeared behind him in the doorway, as he stepped inside.

"Take off your snowshoes," he ordered Timmins, and the under-storekeeper obeyed with real joy. Had Seguis known it, the two men in front of him were much farther from resistance than was their prisoner.

Under command, McTavish donned the rackets, and followed his new captor out of doors. He was entirely prepared for traveling, even to gauntlets, for the temperature of the cabin had been but a few degrees higher than that of outdoors.

Seguis, with a few words to a couple of followers, gave Donald into their charge, bidding him accompany them. Timmins and Buxton, chuckling together, said nothing of the event that Seguis had interrupted, and even McTavish, in his exalted nervous state, was not fool enough to remark: "Don't take me away! — for I'm due to be hanged in the morning."

Seguis and his free-traders had found the approaches to the camp ridiculously easy. In fact, for the last few days sentries had been withdrawn, Fitzpatrick resting assured that the free-traders would not make an aggressive move. He had learned in a parley that all Seguis and his men asked was peace, and a chance to follow their own path. The factor

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was waiting for reinforcements from Fort Severn, which he had asked Braithwaite to secure, if possible, among the friendly trappers; and, until they should arrive, and the present matter of discipline be off his hands, he had no desire to make an attack. Consequently, Seguis's party had crept stealthily closer and closer to the camp, undetected. It was the time when sleep in the North country is almost a coma, and the quiet approach aroused no one. In the light of the aurora and the stars, two log cabins stood forth conspicuously. Knowing Fitzpatrick's love of ceremony and distinction, Seguis gathered that the larger and better one was his. If so, the other probably contained provisions.

During the time that he talked to McTavish and his guards, he had not realized the strange situation in which he found them. As he came nearer and nearer to Jean Fitzpatrick, his mind had grown more and more intense against McTavish. What had happened to the unfortunate Hudson Bay man, he only knew imperfectly. But that the former should be in constant communication with the girl was a spur to his jealous imagination. If he could but get his rival out of the way, for a while at least, things would be so much easier. The bird had fallen unexpectedly into his hand, and for a time he did nothing but congratulate himself. McTavish was now on his way to Sturgeon Lake temporarily, and was safely off the board. . . . But, after a while, the strangeness of the situation in the cabin struck him, and he turned to Timmins.

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"What was going on in this place when I came in?" he asked.

"We were guarding McTavish."

"What for?"

"He was to be hanged to-morrow for the murder of Indian Tom."

Seguis's jaw dropped, and his eyes bulged.

"Damnation, you idiot!" he said at last, wrathfully. "Why didn't you tell me? I wouldn't have interfered for the world."

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CHAPTER XXI

A NOTE AND ITS ANSWER

TEN minutes later, a man approached Seguis.

"We've found the provisions under a tent near the other cabin," he said.

"Quick, then!" the half-breed snapped. "Get them out as soon as you can. If we can get away without being seen, so much the better."

But in this, Seguis had counted without Buxton. Because of the passive actions of the two men upon his appearance the half-breed considered them cowards, and, after disarming them, had kept a careless watch over their movements, though always holding them in sight. In relieving them of rifles and revolvers, he thought he had silenced them, but Buxton was provided against just such an emergency. Beneath his outer garments, he wore a second belt, which permitted the suspension of a revolver in such a position that it could be neither seen nor felt in a hasty examination. Now, when the opportunity offered, he secured this weapon, and fired rapidly a number of times into the air.

Almost immediately tent doors were opened, and men, carrying weapons, burst out, bewildered, but aware of danger from the signal. By previous arrangement, they gathered around the factor's cabin,

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where Buxton had already taken his stand. In a moment, he had told them what had happened, and then the factor himself appeared. In the three weeks that had elapsed, he had recovered sufficiently to leave his bed, and his shoulder was almost healed. Now, he took command. In the meantime, Seguis's men, having secured a goodly supply of provisions, were making all speed into the forest. Fitzpatrick, dazed at the audacity of the free-traders, gave vent to an explosion of fury.

"Fire!" he commanded gratingly. "Kill every one of 'em. Fire!" And the leveled rifles of almost fifty men spoke with unerring aim. Three of those last to leave the camp fell, but the others, now in the protection of the forest, fled away on their snowshoes at top speed.

"After 'em!" snarled Fitzpatrick. "Don't let one of 'em get away. We'll end this matter here."

Instantly there was a rush for tents and belongings, for none of the men had had the opportunity to slip on snowshoes. Fifteen minutes later, the pursuers struck out, led by the aged factor, whose rage seemed to lend him almost superhuman strength. In vain, Jean had besought him to stay in camp, saying that the others would do just as well without him. At last, he had promised reluctantly to return in an hour. Two men who had been wounded previously were ordered to remain, and to put the storehouse in order.

When Charley Seguis heard the pistol of Buxton give warning, his first impulse was to turn upon the

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man, and shoot him dead. But his second — and Seguis usually listened to the second — was to get away peaceably with all the provisions possible. Consequently, his order rang out short and sharp, and was obeyed, for it was the principle of the free-traders to strike no blow except in defense. In his mind's eye, the intelligent half-breed reviewed the scene that must shortly ensue. After that first volley, he could picture the pursuers in their rush for equipment, the hasty start, and the deserted camp. Seguis had come hither for two purposes — to secure food, and to see Jean Fitzpatrick. He had accomplished the first; now to accomplish the second. Putting one of his trusted men in charge of the party, with directions to head for Sturgeon Lake, and explaining he was going to reconnoiter a little, Seguis struck sharply to the right, and began a long, circular détour. Half an hour brought him to a spot behind the Hudson Bay camp, where a considerable hill, with a few scattered trees, sheltered it from the northern storm blasts. Cautiously, and without a sound, Seguis climbed this hill, dodging from tree to tree. At last, he reached the summit, and, lying down on his stomach, peered over. . . . His heart stood still. Not twenty yards away from him, slightly down the declivity, stood Jean Fitzpatrick. Her back was to him, and her eyes were glued to a pair of field-glasses. Evidently, she was trying to discern signs of the pursuit in a clear space several miles away.

Seguis looked beyond her interestedly. There

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was not a sign of life in the camp. The men who had stayed behind to right the storehouse were now in the woods, picking up any supplies that might have been dropped. Fortune had again favored him. Very cautiously, he stood upright, then slowly advanced. So intent was the girl upon the pursuit that she did not hear the delicate crunching of the snowshoes. When ten feet away, he drew himself to his full height, and spoke her name, softly:

"Miss Jean."

She whirled upon him swiftly, and shrank back into herself, as though he had aimed a blow at her. He, on his part, could hardly believe his eyes when he looked into her face. This was not the happy, care-free, girlish Jean Fitzpatrick, who had laughed her way through the brief summer months. He saw, now, the face of a woman, who had learned much and suffered much. There were gravity in the eyes and a seriousness across the brow that served as the badges of this new realization; but there was no fear. After the first shrinking of surprise, she looked him coldly up and down.

"What do you want?" she said.

"To speak with you."

"Did you come for that purpose especially?"

"Yes." Seguis smiled a little, with satisfaction. In searching Timmins, he had found a letter addressed to Jean, in McTavish's handwriting. He might have to use it, and he might not.

"Keep your distance, sir," the girl commanded, haughtily, "and we will talk. If you make a step

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nearer to me than you are now, I'll scream, and those men in the woods will hear me. And, if they hear me, and learn the trouble, it will go hard with you. Now, what do you want?"

Seguis had expected to find a fluttering, fearful youngling, somewhat impressed with his graces and courage. This businesslike disposal of his case caused his active mind to change its tack, as soon as it sensed the veer of the wind.

"I am here," he said, "to present my compliments to you, along with those of a certain other man."

"Whom do you mean?" Jean's voice was now a little tremulous, despite her discipline of it.

"Captain McTavish."

"Oh!" she said, and she was silent for a moment, collecting herself. "But why do you, of all people, come with this message?" she added.

"No reason at all, except that I saved his life this morning, and thought you might want to learn the facts, and perhaps an inkling of his whereabouts."

"Was that really your reason?" she asked, more kindly.

"It was one of them," he answered, significantly.

It was now Jean's turn to look at her companion with some interest. He spoke with a certain dignity and reserve that she had never noticed in him before. His eyes were firm and steady when they met hers; his bearing was courteous. With a sort of

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horrible pleasure, she recognized that this was Donald's half-brother, and looked for a family resemblance. She found a very strong one, in the eyes and general stature. Mercifully for her feelings, the shape of the head was hidden in the swathed *capote* and fur cap. She wondered vaguely if he knew of the relationship.

"Where is — Captain McTavish?" she asked, finally.

"On his way to Sturgeon Lake."

"Did he leave any message for me?"

"A letter that I have in my pocket."

"May I see it?" she asked eagerly, involuntarily stretching forth her hand.

"How can I hand it to you, if I have to keep this distance?" Seguis asked, quizzically, and met her stare with humorous eyes.

"I'll come and get it," she announced, "when you have it in your hand, ready for me to take."

"You haven't thanked me yet for saving his life," the half-breed reminded her. "If it hadn't been for me, he would now be —"

"Don't!" she cried sharply, going pale of a sudden. "Don't ever make any reference to that!" She paused, then added: "I can't thank you enough though, Seguis, for the fact that you saved his life. Why did you do it?"

"I'll tell you later," was the non-committal reply. "In the meantime, here is your letter." He reached inside his shirt, and drew forth a dirty envelope, on which the girl's name was inscribed in

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pencil. He held it toward her without a word, and the girl clutched at it eagerly.

"Just a moment," he said, withholding it. "You must read it here and now. I want to take it away with me. I must ask your promise in this matter."

"Why?"

"You will learn that later, too. Will you promise?"

For a minute, the girl struggled, and then love won. Better to read the bitter parting message and lose it than not see it at all.

"Yes, I promise," she said, quietly; and he immediately put the envelope in her hands.

Her trembling fingers picked at the flap as she turned away.

"You will pardon me?" she announced rather than asked, turning her back upon him. No living being must see her expression as these last words met her eye.

"Certainly."

With seeming nonchalance, Seguis filled his pipe from a skin tobacco-pouch, and began to smoke. The men gathering up scattered stores at the edge of the woods below moved slowly and painfully because of their wounds, he noticed. A snow-bunting chirped from a drift near by, and faintly to his ears from the deeper woods came the chattering scold of a whiskey-jack, or jay. He noticed these things during the first few whiffs. Then, he looked once again at Jean. Her back was still turned, but presently

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she faced him slowly, her cheeks flushed, and her blue eyes starry bright, though wet. He appeared unconscious of her emotion, a thing for which she mentally thanked him. In fact, she found him less offensive every moment. He was different from any half-breed she had ever known, but he was only less offensive than others. He could never be anything better.

"Now, tell me why you want this letter back?" she asked, clinging to it desperately, as though it were her lover's hand.

"I want to take it to Captain McTavish, but I want you to write something on it first. You will pardon me if I ask if that was not a letter of farewell?"

"It was."

"Have you a pencil with you?"

"Not here, but there is one in the cabin, among my father's journals. Shall I get it?" Then she bit her lip with vexation. Instead of dominating this interview, as she had intended, she was submitting herself to the plans of the half-breed.

"I must ask for the letter while you are gone."

After a moment's thought Jean handed it to him, with a promise to return without warning the men at the edge of the woods. A certain curiosity to see this mysterious happening to its conclusion stirred within her. Now that Donald had escaped the shadow of death that had been hovering over him, her spirits rose buoyantly, and she was anxious to further anything that concerned him. She returned

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presently with the pencil, and asked Seguis what he wished her to do.

"Write him a note of farewell," came the stolid command. "It will be the last message he will ever receive from you."

Instantly her color fled; fear filled her eyes.

"What do you mean? You're not going to kill him?" she burst out.

"No. He is going to leave the country forever."

"Did he tell you so?" she asked.

"No. But I want you to tell him so, in your own handwriting. It is the only thing that will save him. He'll obey you. I'll see that he gets a safe-conduct to the edge of the district. If you don't do this, I can't answer for what'll happen to him."

"Then you will kill him!" she flashed. "I knew it. Look here, Seguis! What's your object in this? You have a motive, and I demand to know what it is."

For an instant, the passion of the man leaped to his lips, and trembled there in hot words. But he crushed it down resolutely. He was too wise to ruin his plans now. Later, in a year, in two years, five years perhaps, when the memory of McTavish had dimmed, he would speak. But, now, he must not betray himself.

"I sha'n't kill him," he returned, calmly. "Nothing is further from my mind. But I won't be responsible for what happens to him. There's only one way of saving his life — to send him out

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of the country. If he stays, he'll eventually be captured, and what nearly happened to-day will happen then. You wish him to live, don't you?"

"Yes, yes," she muttered, between dry lips. "Whatever happens to me, he must live."

"Then, write as I suggest. Make it a command, not an entreaty. He'll obey you, and his life will be saved."

For a few moments, Jean paused, irresolute, and then, with difficulty, started the message on the back of the pages McTavish had sent to her. There was no struggle now against the inevitable; that had been endured before. This was merely writing a different final chapter to their romance, and she felt glad of the opportunity to give him life, although life without her and without honor were an empty thing to him. Strong in the feeling that upon her words his very existence depended, she made them eager and hopeful, but imperative, appealing to those instincts in him that could not resist her desire. For perhaps ten minutes, she wrote, and then handed the paper to Seguis.

"I must read it," he said, and, at her nod of acquiescence, puzzled out the words that emotion and her awkward position had made unsteady and misshapen. Then, he nodded his head with satisfaction, and tucked the letter away.

"Seguis," said the girl, when he prepared to go, "what is your motive in doing this? You haven't answered my question."

"My motive and my desire in this matter," he

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replied feelingly, "is to secure your own happiness; nothing else." With that, he turned away, and coasted swiftly down the hill to the edge of the forest whence he had come.

"My own happiness!" repeated the girl to herself, as she saw him disappear. "How strange a thing for him to say! And, yet, if only Donald is alive and safe I shall be happy — in knowing that he can still think of me."

Five minutes later, a wind-driven snow-storm that had threatened all the morning broke with terrible fury, and, scarcely able to stand against the blast, she made her way down to the deserted cabin, just as the returning factor appeared at the edge of the woods.

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CHAPTER XXII

SECRETED EVIDENCE

IT was an hour before sunset, but so uniform had been the darkness all day that neither Donald nor his two companions realized that night was close upon them. Hour after hour they had struggled onward through the blinding, bewildering storm, shelterless and without food, straining forward to the only place where these things might be obtained — Sturgeon Lake. Now, when the blanketing night was almost fallen, they sighted the charred ruins that had once been the warehouse of the free-traders, with a sigh of relief. A shout from one of Donald's companions brought the five men who had been left out of their tents. A shriveled female form joined them, and with a clutch at his heart the prisoner recognized old Maria.

Fortune, whose plaything he had been all this day, was indeed kind to him at last, he thought. He remembered certain trite observations concerning opportunity knocking at a man's door, and the obvious duty of a man to seize such opportunity, and bend it to his own use. If this were opportunity, he said to himself, he would make the most of it.

During that all-day struggle with the storm, Donald McTavish had come into his own again. The

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passive acceptance of fate that had buoyed him even to the shadow of the gallows, had gone from him now. He was all energy and aggressiveness. He resolved to bring matters to a head within the next few days, or know the reason why. What motive had moved Charley Seguis to send him to Sturgeon Lake, he did not know, nor did he care. He only remembered that he was at liberty once again, in a certain sense of the word, and that he had a fighting chance. The sight of old Maria recalled to his mind the words of Angus Fitzpatrick in regard to the marriage certificate that existed as proof of his father's youthful indiscretion. On the instant, he vowed that the hag should give up the truth of the matter before she was many hours older.

As the little party entered the camp, the men who had remained there plied them with questions as to the success of the foraging party. When the meager story had been told, they shook their heads dolefully at the lack of information, and set about the work of preparing the evening meal of fish.

McTavish, as he joined the circle with a ravenous appetite, could scarcely credit the desolation he saw on all sides of him. Now that the main loghouse was down, the settlement presented a dreary and hopeless aspect. The one redeeming feature was the huge pile of rescued fur-bales. The quantity and quality of these impressed him strongly. One of the men, observing his interest in them, remarked:

"If you fellows would get down to business, instead of wasting all winter fussing about us, you

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might have something like that brought into the fort when spring comes, yourselves."

"Well, you see," returned Donald good-humoredly, "our idea is to have those brought in when spring comes. That's all we're fighting for."

"Deuce of a chance you've got of getting those furs!" retorted the other, contemptuously. "We're sick of the H. B.'s starvation trading, and we've quit for good and all."

"The Hudson Bay may give starvation trading, but I'd like to know where else you'll get as much."

Donald was leading the man on, for here was very valuable information, and this babbler evidently did not know the worth of a tight mouth.

"As much!" the trapper snorted. "Why, these Frenchies 'll give us half again as much for a 'beaver' as you chaps ever thought of giving. And there's no use you fellows trying to keep them out, either. This is free territory, you know, even if old Fitz' doesn't think so. I've told Seguis often enough that, if he'd wipe old Fitz' off the map, he'd do the brotherhood more good than any other hundred men."

"I know, my good friend. But when do you suppose these Frenchies will ever connect with you? Maybe never and —"

The other burst into derisive laughter.

"Why, you poor fool!" he cried. "If it hadn't been for this blizzard to-day, we'd have been bargaining with 'em here to-night. Ten big trains of supplies are within thirty miles of us — and you ask

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me if they'll ever connect! That's good!" And he roared with laughter.

McTavish bridled, but kept his temper, for it was evident who was the fool. He continued pressing the subject for some little time further, but elicited no more really valuable information. Judging his man, he came to the conclusion that the fellow knew nothing more.

Being ignorant of the events that had occurred in the Hudson Bay camp after his departure, Donald was unaware of the desperate pursuit that was going on through the howling storm, but it was no surprise that none of Seguis's party returned to the camp.

"Can't travel in this weather," said one man, dolefully. "If this keeps up long, we won't see 'em till it's over. Honest, after this winter, I'll be surprised if I don't sprout fins, I've eaten so much fish."

The camp was about to turn in early when a faint cry sounded outside the circle of tents. Immediately, every one turned out, hoping it was the foragers back. Rushing in the direction of the sound, the men returned, accompanying a bedraggled old man with a gray beard, after whom limped a train of spiritless, wolfish dogs attached to a battered sledge.

"Thought I was done for in that storm, boys," said the aged *voyageur* wagging his head, "but I remembered this cove around the headland, and made for it. Got anything to eat?"

According to the unwritten law of Northern hos-

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pitality, Bill Thompson, for so he gave his name, was taken in, and given what the camp afforded. He seemed to be a harmless old vagrant, whose point of departure and intended point of arrival on this journey were difficult to ascertain. He talked unceasingly of nothing in particular, and delivered endless narratives of adventures that had befallen him in his lurid and distant youth.

All that night, the storm continued unabated, and the next morning when the camp aroused itself, Bill Thompson gave out the dictum that it would continue for two days more at least. McTavish and his companions congratulated themselves that they had made the camp the night before, for in such weather traveling was almost an impossibility.

At the meager breakfast Donald realized for the first time that Maria had not appeared since the night before, when he had seen her upon their arrival. When he had pulled up his belt a notch, and lighted his pipe, the trapper's substitute for a full meal, he wandered back to the tent where he had slept. He was allowed perfect liberty among these men, first, because the weather made it impossible for him to attempt escape, and, second, because they had received no orders to keep him under strict guard. Despite his wretched situation, this morning the spirit of happiness and determination that had seized him the night before was strong upon him, and he settled himself to formulating his plans. Suddenly, right beside him at the tent door, he discovered the bent form of old Maria. How she had got there he did

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not know, for she seemed to have risen directly out of the earth. Her presence both startled him, and filled him with a quick hatred.

This was the creature who held in her filthy, withered hand the happiness of so many persons; this was the creature that his father had lov— No! Not that, for he could only have loved the beautiful girl he had married in Montreal.

Donald looked at the old woman with a kind of pitying loathing. What a terrible thing it was that such a worthless bit of humanity should hold so much power! She was within reach of his hands. A quick clutch, a stifled squawk, a brief struggle, and she would be dead. And how much that was to come might be averted! He laughed a little at such a method of cutting the Gordian knot.

"Laugh while you can, young McTavish," Maria croaked, suddenly. "It won't be for long."

"Why not, old raven?" he asked, regarding her interestedly.

The certificate! That was it. She had the certificate, and he must get it.

"The right man is coming," she replied. "The pride of his father's heart! Ha, ha! Yes, the pride of his father's heart! He'll be rich, and have the honors heaped high. You'd better go, young McTavish — go while there's yet time."

"Why should I go? What are you talking about, anyway, old woman?"

"You lie!" she yelled at him suddenly, being close. "I see it in your eyes. You know all.

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You know why you should go. And I warn you to go."

"Warn me? What about?"

"If there should be blood, it would do no hurt," she muttered, vaguely. "Then, he would come into his own, the rightful heir, my son."

Donald glanced at the beldam with a certain uneasiness now. He felt a veiled threat, although, he told himself, she was mad. And, yet if she felt that Seguis must be recognized, what would keep her from doing incalculable harm?

"You talk a lot, but you say little," he retorted, with a sneer. "You make plenty of moves, but you accomplish nothing. That's a squaw every time."

The little eyes blazed upon him red, and her withered face shook with fury.

"Accomplish nothing, eh, young McTavish? We shall see. Ha! You'll wish you'd never been born — you and your father and mother, and all!"

"More talk!" he gibed. "I want proofs. If you can show me proofs of what you claim, I'll do all I can to help your son to his rightful place."

"My son!" she taunted, in turn. "Your brother? Your brother, young McTavish! Call him brother, next time you see him." Her shrieking mirth mingled fittingly with the anguish of the wind among the trees. But suddenly, she stopped short, and looked at him with questioning eyes.

"You'll help him, you say, if I can give the proof that I was McTavish's wife?"

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"Yes."

Donald lied heartily: the occasion demanded it. Long since, he had decided for himself that truth was not a garment to be worn on all occasions. To those he loved, he would tell the truth if it killed him, but others must depend upon the circumstances of the case. Now, he knew that, if he could get documentary proof within arm's reach, he would destroy it, though it earned him a knife between the ribs. He watched her like a hawk, although apparently totally indifferent to the conversation.

"You promise you'll help him — my son?"

"Yes."

Donald's vision suddenly became riveted upon the clawlike right hand of the hag. An involuntary muscle, following the half-ordained bidding of the brain, had moved perhaps three inches toward her breast. There, it stopped, and slipped down again.

"Look in my eyes," the witch commanded, bending down and putting her face close.

He removed his pipe, and turned to meet her gaze. Then, he realized that never in his life had he looked into human eyes that in cruelty, keenness, and suspicion equaled these. That glare went through the retina, into the brain, and down, down to the hidden and undiscoverable recess of the soul, plumbing, searching, proving. He began to feel as though he were looking at a dazzling light. . . . Suddenly, the light was turned off, and he heard a snarl.

"Liar! I can see the treachery in your heart! Fool, to try to deceive me! I might have put trust

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in your words once; but now I know!" In her fury, she seemed saner than he had ever known her hitherto, and it was then, for the first time, that he got an idea of Maria's abnormal powers of analysis. Any person who could rivet one with a gaze like that, he thought, was worth watching. For fully ten minutes, she raved, scattering words with prodigal recklessness. McTavish did not listen to the abuse. He was thinking of other things. Presently, she flung herself out of the tent, with a final shriek, and the man acted at once.

He fastened on his snowshoes and crawled awkwardly out on all-fours after her. In the driving, blinding snow, he could just see her small figure, dimly. He followed it. The involuntary motion of Maria's hand to her bosom was the one thing that he had needed. He had been afraid that some split tree, or hollow beneath a rock, might contain the thing he wanted; now, he was certain that she carried it upon her person.

On he went, away from the camp, of which the circle of tents was almost buried. Donald, veering from the path, since it might lead to an embarrassing encounter, kept his quarry always in sight, and followed. Was the woman crazy, he wondered, that she should wander aimlessly out into a death-dealing storm? But, at last, when he was on the point of turning back for fear of losing his location entirely, Maria came to the foot of an unusually large tree, and halted. The pursuer dropped behind a little drift he had just started to mount, and waited. If

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this were her destination, he knew she would peer about. A moment later, his suspicions were verified. But, in the quick glance of her keen eyes, she passed over the practically invisible snow-covered form that lay so near her. When the man raised his head again, she had turned her attention to the tree, and had pulled open a little, low door that allowed her to crawl into the very heart of the trunk. A moment later, the door swung to, and Maria apparently was no more.

McTavish did not wonder now why he had seen her so seldom in the camp. No doubt, she had her own supply of food safe inside, and did not come out until hunger or her inclination prompted. He looked at the tree to mark it in his mind, and observed that it was tall and bare, with practically no needles or foliage of any sort. Huge bumps and broken limbs made it one in a thousand. On the leeward side of the tree, he thought he noticed a glow of light. He brushed the snow from his eyes, and looked again. This time, he was sure. He guessed that this was an air-hole bored through the wall of the trunk, and that Maria was building a fire inside. For a moment, he envied her coziness. Then, he crawled stealthily forward, until within ten feet of the big hollow pine. The air-holes, he noticed now, were not made on the north and west sides of the tree. Evidently, she counted on the suction of the wind to draw out the smoke and foul air.

The noise of the storm easily drowned any sounds the observer might make, and he moved with con-

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siderable freedom, now that the woman could not see him. Plainly, the air-holes had been made by other hands than hers, for they were higher than her head; in fact Donald himself would have to stretch to look down. He selected a hole about three inches in diameter, and peered in. The smoke filled his eye, but he saw enough to know that the old squaw was seated on the floor of her habitation, nursing her little fire. He could not quite see all her actions, so he moved to a larger hole. Presently, the fire burned brightly, and Maria began to rock back and forth, and sing to herself. Suddenly, she burst out into a weird laugh, and cried:

"Ha! The fool! The fool! If he only knew I almost showed him!" Chuckling and muttering incoherently, she put a stealthy hand into her bosom, and drew forth a little bag of muskrat skin. Donald, cursing softly the smoke that filled his eyes, did his best to stand on tiptoe.

The bag was suspended around Maria's neck by a leathern thong, and was operated by pull-strings. Still rocking back and forth, the crone loosened the strings, and opened the bag. Then, she drew forth a paper, old and dirty and yellow. It was so worn in the creases that it almost fell apart, but over it ran fine writing, in a good hand. Donald, strain his eyes as he might, could not make out a single word of it.

Now came the impulse to rush inside, seize the paper, jerk loose the bag, and make away with both. Donald had indeed slipped off his snowshoes

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preparatory to entrance when a great yelling and hallooing in the forest near by caused him to change his plan of action. Slipping on his *rackets* again, he sped swiftly back toward the camp. He had hardly disappeared, when the old squaw pushed aside the home-made doorway of her strange dwelling, and looked curiously in the direction of the noises.

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CHAPTER XXIII

THE BROTHERS

ONE by one, exhausted, but joyful, the trappers of the Free-Traders' Brotherhood straggled into their long-sought camp. Nearly all had small packs on their backs, as though the provisions secured had been distributed around evenly. In the lead, as usual, was Charley Seguis. At the end of the procession came two or three wounded trappers, supported by their comrades.

One of the first to greet the arrivals was Donald McTavish. His wonder at the skill and stamina that carried the men through that awful storm expressed itself in eagerness to assist in relieving men of their packs. The gaunt, half-starved five that had been left at Sturgeon Lake pounced upon the food, and, without more ado, started to brew pails of tea, and to thaw out meat. In the midst of his work, Donald suddenly found himself side by side with Bill Thompson, the *voyageur* who had arrived the night before. At a moment when they were unobserved, the old man spoke into the young man's ear.

"I want to see you alone at the earliest opportunity," he said.

Donald looked at his companion in amazement,

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and saw something in the other's face that drew instant assent.

The story of Seguis's party was soon told. The men had been traveling hardly an hour when the storm overtook them. From an eminence, they had seen the pursuit of the Hudson Bay men, and, though they had run at top speed, the packs of provisions had retarded them to such an extent that their pursuers were gaining steadily. When the storm broke, however, these very provisions saved their lives, for the Hudson Bay men, being without means of shelter or sustenance, had given up the chase, rather than lose their lives in a pursuit of which the favorable outcome was so problematical. Seguis, striking into the usual trail to the camp, had overtaken his men that night, while they were still struggling on, and had ordered a halt. Confident of their safety, they had camped, and then resumed their march at daybreak, finding their bearings, and keeping them, by the skill known to woodcraft.

It was now noon, and there was still no abatement in the storm. After a good meal, Donald sought out Bill Thompson, while the other men huddled in their tents, and recounted the experiences of the hazardous march.

"Didn't I hear somebody call you McTavish?" asked the old trapper, suddenly dropping the garrulousness that had characterized him so far, and looking at the young man out of keen gray eyes.

"Yes." Donald's perplexity at this strange interview increased.

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"Son of the commissioner, are you?"

"Yes, I am. Why?"

"I used to know your father, many years ago; but things went differently for us after a while, and I lost track of him. I haven't seen him in twenty years. Fine man, he is, though."

"You're a Hudson Bay man, then?" Donald inquired.

"Oh, my, yes! Been one all my life, and my boys are trapping for the Company now, down on the English River district. That's where I came from."

"Well, you hadn't better stay here any longer than you can help, or you'll never get away. These fellows are free-traders, you know."

"I gathered as much from that loose-mouthed jay, Baptiste. The reason I spoke to you is that I want to find out where I can lay hold of Angus Fitzpatrick, the Fort Severn factor. Had a little trouble in my section, and I thought I'd just shift up here for a while. I've lost most of the season now, and I've got to get busy."

Donald outlined briefly the position of the factor and the reason that took him away from the fort at this time of the year. Then an idea, full-clothed, leaped into his mind.

"You've seen that pile of furs over there, haven't you?" he asked, indicating the rich haul of the free-traders.

"Yes."

"Well, I want you to investigate them on the sly, and learn about how many there are. I'm the cap-

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tain of a post on the Dickey River, and I engage you now as my messenger and representative. Give up your idea of trapping for this winter. I've plenty for you to do. No one knows anything about you here, and I think you can get away without being stopped.

"Drive like the devil to the Hudson Bay camp twenty miles up the lake, and tell old Fitzpatrick the best inventory of furs you can secure before you leave. Then, tell him to quit worrying about these free-traders here. Tell him there is a huge train of trading supplies from a French company within thirty miles of this camp somewhere, and say that, if he wants to put an end to this business to capture that train before it arrives.

"These men will starve here in a little while, if they don't lay in a lot of grub, for what they stole the other day can't last very long. Now, if the Frenchies get through with their trains first, Fitzpatrick will have a devil of a time beating these men. They are determined and brainy, at least the leader is, and they have a catch of unusually fine furs — a remarkable catch. Tell him, if he wants to break the back of this trouble, to stop that French train. Last of all, ask him to have ten men with provisions go to the big pine at Muskeg Point, and wait there till I come. It may be several days but I'll come somehow. Tell him, whatever he does, to do this.

"Now, Thompson, the factor and I have had a lot of trouble this winter, and the chances are that we will have a lot more, but I want you to tell him

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that Donald McTavish sent you with those messages, and that I'm faithful to the Company through everything."

"Well, Mr. McTavish," said the old man, "I'll have to pull my freight in this storm, I guess, and in the middle of the night, too. Possibly, to-morrow morning may be clear, and, if it is, I doubt if I could explain my destination satisfactorily. I'll move to-night."

"And I'll help you," said Donald.

By midnight, there was still no change in the weather. The young man crawled from his shelter and sought out Thompson, who, with his dogs, occupied a tent near the ruins of the old warehouse. A tiny pack of provisions that had been stolen and saved during the day Thompson put upon his rickety sledge.

"Did you get a chance to look over those furs?" asked McTavish.

"Sure; I spent an hour with 'em, and I don't think my estimate will be off more than a hundred skins. And, say, they're beauties, too."

"Remember all I told you to tell Fitzpatrick."

"Yes. Now, to get down to the lake! This is a northwest wind, and I'll have to fight it every inch of the way. What's the landmark by the camp?"

Donald told him, and added:

"Thompson, more depends upon you than you have any idea of. Tell the factor to hurry, hurry, *hurry*, if he's going to get that supply train. Good-by."

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The weather-beaten *voyageur* gripped the outstretched hand, and led the dogs over the new snow to the lake. It would be bitter work, for there were drifts and no crust.

"Look here, McTavish, why don't you make your get-away now?" suddenly demanded Thompson.

"I'm on a hot trail of another sort here," was the curt answer; "and I won't go until I have followed it to the end."

Thompson asked no more questions, but "mushed" the dogs, and a minute later was swallowed up in the swirling flakes.

The following day was a busy one in the free-traders' camp. The storm did not abate until nightfall, and during that time the men were engaged in digging their habitations clear of the snow that almost threatened to bury them. In this work, McTavish cheerfully took a hand, and, by his good-humored banter, won his way to the hearts of his fellow-toilers. Notwithstanding his industry, the Hudson Bay man kept his eye open for glimpses of Maria who, as he expected, was constantly about, now that Charles Seguis had returned. He was surprised that Seguis had nothing to say to him, and wondered anew what had been the motive of his sudden liberation. The idea of connecting Jean and the half-breed never entered his head.

By the following morning the air was clear and prickly with cold, and the sky seemed as though newly polished when the sun rose. The days were becoming longer now, and the daylight hours nearly

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equaled those of darkness. It was when Donald had given up the idea of Seguis's desiring to see him that the unexpected happened. The half-breed approached shortly after noon, and requested his prisoner to walk a little way into the woods, as he had something to communicate. Puzzled, but prepared for anything, Donald agreed. Subconsciously, he felt that this was to be one of the crises of his life, and he gathered himself to meet it. The same spirit of aggressiveness and determination that had characterized him since his liberation possessed him now. He resolved to take command of the situation if he could; if not, to make his defeat seem a victory. The first wheels of his machinery of reprisal and revenge had been set in motion with Thompson's departure, two nights before. Already, the Hudson Bay men had had thirty-six hours to block the French approach to the free-traders' camp. Perhaps, it was concerning this very thing that Charley Seguis wished to speak to him.

For a quarter of an hour they trudged in silence through the forest. A fallen tree at last projected across their path, and Seguis set an example by sitting down. Donald followed suit.

"As you can imagine," began Seguis evenly, "what I have to say to you is not pleasant. I have a message to deliver."

"Who from?" Donald, reviewing quickly the persons with whom Seguis might have come in contact, could think of no one who would send him a message.

Seguis parried.

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"Perhaps, you remember writing a letter that night in the cabin?"

"Yes."

"Well, it was delivered."

There was an instant's silence, as the significance of this flashed on Donald.

"H-m, I see," he remarked quietly, "and you bring the answer?"

"Yes, here it is." Seguis handed over the letter, upon the back of which Jean had written.

Donald, with considerable difficulty, read the almost illegible lines, and, when he came to the signature, laughed aloud.

"This is absurd," he said calmly, putting the letter in his pocket. "That is not Miss Fitzpatrick's handwriting."

"I must ask you to believe she wrote that message," rejoined Seguis, coldly.

"Well, I don't believe it, and I won't," was Donald's equally cool retort. "It's a hoax, pure and simple."

"The writing may be a hoax, but the sense is not."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Donald, sharply.

"I mean that what is contained in that letter goes as it stands. I will give you a safe-conduct out of the country, if you'll accept it. If you won't, I shall restore you to the Hudson Bay officials, with an apology for having interfered with justice." Seguis's tone was level and determined.

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McTavish lost color.

"You can't mean that, Seguis," he said, earnestly.

"I do mean it," was the inflexible reply.

Donald reflected for a moment. The situation was getting out of his hands. He must dominate matters at all costs. The plans that he had set in motion must not stop until they had gone on to their inevitable, crushing conclusion. It was evident that the half-breed was equally determined. The battle now lay between them.

"I refuse to go," he said, resolutely.

"Is that final?" asked Seguis.

"Absolutely!"

"Well, then, to-morrow, you start up the lake to the other camp." Seguis rose from his seat, indifferently. "I guess we've nothing left to discuss," he added, and began to walk back toward the camp.

"Seguis, wait!" Donald's face was ghastly with the resolve that had come to him, but he spoke with an even, commanding voice, which arrested the other. "You must not do that. It would be murder."

"How so? You have your opportunity to avoid it."

"Would you murder your own flesh and blood? Tell me, Seguis, would you do that?" The voice was still even, but the eyes that searched those of the half-breed were bright with an intense fire.

"What do you mean by 'my own flesh and blood?' Are you going crazy, McTavish?" demanded the half-breed, feeling, he knew not why, a mysterious fear move within him.

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"Crazy! No, indeed, my good Seguis — only too far from it, I sometimes think!" was the spoken reply. But over and over to himself, McTavish was saying: "He doesn't know it! He doesn't know it!"

"Well, what do you mean then?"

"Just what I say; that, if you send me back to the other camp, you'll be murdering your own flesh and blood. Good God! man, don't you know who your father was?"

"No — she never told me." Seguis, in a dazed manner, indicated the camp where Maria still prowled about. "Wh — who was he?"

"The — the same as mine! The man who sits in the commissioner's chair to-day —"

"Not McTavish, *the* McTavish?" cried the half-breed, trembling from head to foot. "No, no, it can't be! Don't say so!"

"But it is, and that's all there is about it," growled Donald, grimly. "Why? What difference does it make to you?"

"Then you — you, Captain McTavish, you are my half-brother?"

"Yes."

"And I was about to kill you, and I have already tried once, and my mother has tried, and Tom — oh, why haven't I known this before? Why didn't she tell me?"

For the moment, Seguis seemed utterly lost in the mazes of his own thoughts and memories. He stood with folded arms, his head hanging upon his

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breast, while his lips moved in self-communion. Then came the reaction, and disbelief, and it was necessary to go over the ground with him from beginning to end. Concisely and briefly, Donald outlined the whole march of events that had led up to this inevitable revelation.

Then, as never before, the Hudson Bay man realized how far-reaching and potent are the little things of life, and, after all, how far from free agents we are sometimes. Forty-five years before, perhaps, his father, alone in the wilds, had yielded to the warm, dusky beauty of an Indian princess, and now, when, by all the laws of chance and custom, that germ of evil should have expired, it sprang into life and propagated a harvest of intrigue and death. And he, the son, by no fault of his own, was unwillingly but unavoidably involved in the penalty.

To Seguis the meaning of it all came as a blinding flash. In an instant, he analyzed his heritage of ambition and knew the desires of his mother for what they were. He looked back now upon his life of advancement with discerning eyes, and, suddenly, ahead of him, not far now since this revelation, he saw a shining goal.

"Then, I am the rightful heir of the commissioner?" he asked, in an awed voice.

"Yes," Donald answered, bitterly. "You are everything and, by law, can have everything; I am no one, and, by the same law, can have nothing but what affection or pity dictates. But it is not because of this that I spoke to you," he went on, proudly.

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"It was to save my life at least for a little while, as I have work to do."

"And so have I — so have I!" muttered Seguis, abstractedly, his eyes burning bright. "It's all right, McTavish; nothing will come of this. You can either stay, or I'll fit you out for the trail if you want to take it," he added. But it was easy to see that his mind was not in his words.

Donald uttered no thanks. He had gained his end; he would not be sent back to the Hudson Bay camp. He looked at his brooding companion, furtively.

"Let him enjoy his hour of triumph and dreaming," he thought, good-humoredly; "it won't last long." And he started back through the woods to the camp.

Seguis, apparently wrapped in pleasurable plans, followed slowly at a distance.

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CHAPTER XXIV

NINE POINTS OF THE LAW

FOR two days, affairs in the camp remained unchanged. Donald, unobtrusively watching events, saw Charley Seguis often in conference with old Maria. The faces of both were lighted with a certain joy, but, at times, that of the half-breed seemed to assume a brooding somberness. McTavish, for his part, was merely waiting. After that stormy day by the blasted pine, and the glimpse he had caught of the coveted certificate, a change had been wrought in him. He temporarily relinquished the idea of obtaining the paper: that had come later. Other things of more vital importance demanded his attention, things that boded no good for these men in whose midst he lived, unmolested, an alien. He had seen opportunity to serve the Company, that inflexible master which had almost crushed his life out more than once, and the inherent loyalty in him had responded. Where before he had been willing to give his life in defense of his own ideals, now he was setting personal desire aside that the Company might be served.

In the free-traders' camp, the situation was once more becoming acute. Supplies were again low, although the week allowed for the arrival of the

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French pack-trains was not up. The men were loath to leave the camp exposed, to search for the expected arrivals, and they hung on, trusting that the traders would come through.

The third morning after the talk with Seguis, the Hudson Bay man opened another conversation between them.

"I've changed my mind, Seguis, about staying here any longer," he said. "The other day, you promised to fit me out for the trail, if I wanted to go, and I've decided to take advantage of that offer, if it's still open."

"It is still open," replied the other. "What has changed your mind so suddenly?"

"Oh, everything!" was the despondent answer. "I can't see much ahead of me, and I might as well hit the trail. I think I'll head for Labrador. I can make it just about when spring breaks, and I'll start over again."

A light of exultation leaped into Seguis's eyes, but he did not betray his emotion either by voice or gesture.

"As you like," he said. "When do you wish to leave? I can't give you much food."

"To-day, if I can. I'm sick of this whole business. I'll take what you'll give me. And I'll say this, that you've treated me white — under the circumstances."

"Please, don't say anything about it," rejoined Seguis, quickly.

An hour later, Donald stood ready for his de-

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parture, the mask of humility and depression hiding the fear and worry in his heart. He must have one stroke of luck, and it had not come! Well, it wasn't absolutely necessary, but it would help.

Suddenly, out of the woods burst a man on snowshoes, running at top speed toward the camp. Donald's heart leaped within him. Had he guessed right, after all? Had things happened as he hoped? The man glissaded down the hill, and, without any attempt to check his progress, began to yell at the top of his voice:

"Queek! Ze help! We must have him. I am of ze party *Français.* We haf been attack' an' captur' by ze Hudson Bay men. Only I haf escap'. By gar! Come! Eet is only five mile, maybe four. I will lead you. Come! Come!"

Instantly, there was uproar in the camp. Everyone shouted questions and answers at once. A dozen men gave orders. Yet, in ten minutes, Seguis's whole force stood in its snowshoes, with cartridge-belts strapped on, and rifles ready. Grim determination and anger were written on every face.

Donald, in the confusion, slipped away swiftly over the hard crust, and took a position behind a breastwork of shrubbery, whence he could watch operations unseen. Five minutes later, the free-traders, with Seguis at the heels of the voluble guide, swung away, leaving a handful of wounded to look after the camp.

Now, it was McTavish's turn to fly. Without looking behind, he sped in the opposite direction, and

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laid his course for the big pine at Muskeg Point, two miles away. Despite the situation in which he was placed, the prospect of action, even the very exercise as he trotted along, raised a joy in his breast. The time for reprisal had come. Though he should go into exile immediately after, the blow he was about to strike would never be forgotten.

Arrived at the big pine, his heart dropped like a plummet. There were no men there, nor any tracks of men. Could it be that the factor had ignored his directions? No, hardly that, for the French trains had been captured. What, then, was the matter? With his eyes at their keenest, he looked about him.

The eye of the trapper is, under ordinary conditions, as powerful as some field-glasses; moreover, it is trained to see, not merely to look. In a minute, Donald resolved a weather-beaten bump on a near-by tree into the capote-shrouded head of a man who was peering from cover. He waved his hand, and the man stepped out. In a moment more, others came forth, ten in all, and surrounded him, plying him with questions. Timmins was there, and Buxton, and old Bill Thompson. When the greetings had passed, greetings reserved, but full of feeling, McTavish explained the situation at the camp he had just left, and indicated his project. Then, in the lead, he began the stealthy return march.

It was barely eleven o'clock when the party arrived at the edge of the woods near the camp. Of the five men that had been left, two were away fishing, and the others, barely able to struggle about,

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were seated around a fire smoking. Near them, and in the center of the camp, well protected by old blankets, was the huge pile of furs. This was the object of McTavish's solicitude. The first step in his plan had been to return to the Company the valuable skins that the free-traders had collected. With those gone, the whole organization would fall to the ground; it would have no excuse for being. Perhaps, then, its members would come back into the Company's roll!

Detailing a couple of his men to capture the unsuspecting anglers, Donald gave the word to advance. So quietly was this done that the three about the camp-fire, deep in some argument, did not notice their approach.

"Well, boys, the game's up," cried Donald, fifty yards away, and the three looked into the rifles leveled at them, in utter stupefaction.

It was a bloodless victory. Swift hands disarmed the free-traders, and, presently, the surprised fishermen were marched in from the lake to join their comrades in misfortune. As there was much to be done, Donald disposed of the men in a characteristic manner. He had their blankets moved over to a stump that rose four or five feet above the snow. Then, he tied a foot of each with a long strand of rope, fastening the rope to the stump. A man investigated frequently to see that no one had tampered with the tether.

It was Donald's idea to save the furs without injury, if possible. Therefore, he and his men set

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about protecting them with a rude breastwork of logs. What solid embers of the burned warehouse still remained were dragged across the snow, and piled on that side from which Seguis and his men were expected to return. The woods sounded with the blows of axes as the skilled woodsmen felled dead trees, or cut branches, to fill the spaces between logs. While this work went on McTavish personally rounded up the supplies of the camp. There was little food, but considerable ammunition. Both of these he deposited behind the breastwork of logs. The wretches at their tether watched him with tragic eyes.

One man made tea, which all hands stopped long enough to drink. Then, the frenzied work went on again. By mid-afternoon, a formidable defense for the men had been erected. Behind it, the blankets and accouterments of the Hudson Bay party were gathered.

Suddenly, a distant shot was heard. Then, there was silence. It was as though there had been a signal given to which there was no reply.

"Mac," said Timmins, "the old man ought to forgive you for this."

"I don't care whether he does, or not. I'm not doing this for him. But, by the way, Timmins, where's the factor now? Did he go with the boys to cut off the Frenchmen?"

"No; he's laid up at the old camp. You know that day you were captured, well, he was so mad at Seguis and his men that he lit out in the pursuit.

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He's ugly when he's mad, but he's too darned old to do them foolish things. When he came back, he was chilled, and what with getting over his wound, and the exposure of the chase, and everything, he came down sick again. So, when Bill Thompson arrived with your orders, he turned 'em over to McLean, and let him do what he liked. McLean hasn't been favored with too much brains, but he knew enough to follow them. Now, it looks like you had a strangle-hold on the whole business. The other bunch got the supply-trains, you say, an' we've got the furs. Don't know as I'd care to be a free-trader about now, or a little later."

"Wait a minute!" cried Donald, who had been trying vainly to interrupt. "Is the factor really sick this time?"

"Yes. Dr. Craven's with him all the time, and he let it out that the old fellow's about ready to tune up his eternal harp."

"And Miss Fitzpatrick? Where's she?"

"She's with him, nursing him like a child. But, whew! the way he treats her when he gets cranky! How she stands it, I don't know."

Donald asked no more questions. His thoughts leaped the desolate, frozen miles to where a lonely girl watched hour by hour beside the wretched bed of her father, only relieved now and then by a perfunctory and uninterested doctor. He had not allowed himself to think of her often; it was a dangerous and poignant subject for him. He had kept his mind upon the plans that he had set in operation.

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If those failed, he might entertain the sickening thought of never seeing her again. He had no right to marry her and ruin her life, willing though she might be. Perhaps, it would be a cruel mercy to go away. All this, if his plans failed. If they succeeded, there was still the question of Charley Seguis and his own nonentity, the certificate in Maria's muskrat-skin bag, and —

"Hey! What's this?" cried Timmins suddenly, sitting bolt upright.

Donald peered over the protection, and stiffened into immobility. Out from the edge of the forest, silently and swiftly, poured Charley Seguis and his band, their guns held in readiness. Suddenly, they saw the change that had come over the camp, and halted abruptly in amazed groups.

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CHAPTER XXV

AGAINST FEARFUL ODDS

DONALD seized his opportunity, and stood up to his full height, exposing his head and shoulders.

"Seguis," he said, "you're covered. I've come back with my men, and taken possession of your furs. I call upon you to surrender."

Though a hundred yards away, the amazement depicted on the half-breed's face was apparent. The men behind the barricade had thrust the long, black barrels of their guns through loopholes left for that purpose, and trained them upon the disorganized free-traders.

For a tense minute, there was no reply. Then, Seguis spoke.

"Let me talk a moment with my men, will you?" he asked.

"I'll give you five minutes by the clock." Donald drew out the queer gold watch that was an heirloom, and held it in his hand while the seconds ticked away. Seguis talked rapidly to his followers.

"Time's up!" Donald snapped at last, shoving the watch back into the fur-lined pocket of his jacket. "What are you going to do? Will you put down your arms peaceably, or shall I fire?"

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"Fire and be hanged!" was the instant reply, as Seguis raised his own gun.

Instantly, the ten rifles behind the barricade barked as one. But, in the same second, as though by preconcerted signal, the forty men at the edge of the forest dropped flat on the snow, and the bullets whistled over them. The next moment, they had leaped to their feet, and scrambled into the shelter of trees and brush.

"Well, boys, we're in for it now," said Donald cheerfully, happier now that battle offered than he had been for many weeks. "They've got us at a disadvantage, and the odds are four to one, so every shot must count."

"Right-o!" rejoined Timmins, and fell to whistling through his back teeth, a sure sign with him of complete satisfaction.

Then began a grilling wait. Occasionally, a dark form would appear among the trees, speeding from shelter to shelter, and the guns of the besieged would ring out sharply into the still air. More than once, the bullets went home, and the runner leaped into the air with a yell, and rolled over and over upon the snow.

"They're surrounding us," said Donald calmly. "I hate to do it, but we'll have to use these furs after all, and a fur with a bullet hole in it isn't worth anything."

He called for volunteers to help him arrange the protection, and, when everyone spoke, told off alternate men to keep the enemy covered while the others

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worked. The bales of pelts were frozen into the rigidity of iron, and would form an excellent defense, but they were not now in the proper position for this. It was necessary for the men to crawl out over the low line that lay to their rear, and lift other bales back into the "trench" that was formed by the log barricade.

The free-traders in the woods were aware of this necessity for exposure, and waited until a man started on his venturesome journey. Then, they all blazed away at once. McTavish was the first to expose himself. He returned with a bullet hole in his cap, and minus a generous share of one boot-heel. Then, strategy was resorted to. A man would make a feint of rushing from cover. Instantly, the heads of the men in the woods would appear, lying along their gun-barrels, and, in the same instant, the bullets from the barricade would fly thick. After one such feint, three of the enemy did not reappear, and then the foe began to grow cautious, never knowing when the appearance of a head out of the trench meant a feint or an expedition.

It was impossible that such hazardous work should not have tragic results. Trip after trip, Donald made without harm, but his men were not so fortunate. One was killed outright, and another, game to the last, threw himself back among his companions, coughing blood from a bullet hole in the lung, but with two bales of fur in his hands.

The free-traders, by this time, had almost completed their circle, and could fire upon the besieged

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from every side except that which led down to the lake. Consequently, Donald was forced to cover every direction at once, and could not concentrate more than two rifles upon any one point. Presently, the firing from the woods became hotter, and the Hudson Bay leader, recognizing the symptoms, crawled back and forth in the narrow trench, speaking to his men.

"They're probably going to try and carry our position with a charge. Shoot to kill, but don't shoot one man — Charley Seguis."

"But, Captain, he's the ringleader," cried Timmins, annoyed. "If you finish him, the rest of 'em will go to the four winds."

"I know it," replied McTavish, "but I must still ask you to spare him. You remember, he saved my life once, although he didn't mean to, and, besides, I have other and better reasons for asking this: reasons that I can't tell you now. In time, you'll all know — if we can get out of this thing alive."

"Oh, pshaw! We'll get out of it alive all right," drawled Buxton.

The man had Yankee blood in him somewhere, for now he was chewing tobacco industriously, and staining the snow in front of the barricade, where a loophole between the logs offered him opportunity for marksmanship of varying sorts.

"Here's hoping, boys," was Donald's rejoinder. "Now, their plan will probably be this: A stiff fire will suddenly be poured in from one quarter to draw our attention there. At the same time, a charge will

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start from the opposite side, and be upon us before we know it. Watch for it!"

He had hardly got the words out of his mouth, when there was a sudden, fierce volley from the point just back of the black spot where once the warehouse had stood. The men in the trench crouched low.

"Watch that firing, Timmins and Cameron," was the order. "The rest face the other way."

The seven fighting men left, swung around, and, in a minute, saw thirty trees suddenly give birth to thirty gray, swift-moving men, who, with guns swinging loosely in their hands swooped down the declivity at alarming speed. Seguis, tall and lithe, led them.

"Fire!" Five of the charging trappers sprawled forward, their arms outstretched, guns flying, and snowshoes plowing the loose snow that covered the surface.

"Fire!" One rifle only responded now: the hammers of the others clicked sharply in unison, but there was no explosion.

Nevertheless, the charge broke into precipitate retreat.

"What's the matter there, boys?"

"Ca'tridges no blame good!" drawled Buxton, trying vainly to stanch the flow of blood where one of his fingers had been carried away. "Prob'ly they're center-fire ca'tridges for rim-fire guns, or vicy-versy."

McTavish clenched his teeth.

"I might have known it," he said. "These rebels

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have collected all the old ammunition they could find and stored it here. Some of 'em have guns made in 1850, I guess."

Meanwhile, a rapid examination was being made. Buxton was right. While the rifles were center-fire, a great many of the cartridges were rim-fire, and consequently useless unless broken and the powder and ball rammed home as in the old muzzle-loaders. There were, however, among the little mounds of cartridges, many that would fit the guns, and these were sorted with desperate energy in the lull that followed the fighting.

Presently, one of the free-traders, with a piece of blanket tied about his rifle-barrel, appeared in the foreground. The besieged, realizing the spirit in which the sign was offered, agreed that it once might have represented a white flag.

"What do you want?" inquired Donald.

"Want to pick up our dead and wounded."

"Go ahead. Are you ready to talk surrender yet? I can offer you every consideration, if you don't go on with your tactics."

"Quit wasting time, McTavish," cried Seguis, suddenly appearing beside his standard-bearer. "We won't surrender — ever! We want that fort, and we're going to have it. If you get out now, we won't hurt you. If you keep this thing up, I can't promise anything. My Indians here are getting a little excited."

"All right, if that's the way you feel about it," Donald retorted. "Turn 'em loose. Say! Pick

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up your men if you want to, but only two men on the field at once. Number three gets a bullet."

"All right."

A moment later, a couple of trappers, unarmed, walked out upon the declivity, and began to haul their dead and wounded comrades back into shelter. During the lull, the beseiged filled their belts with what good ammunition there was — ten rounds per man. Bill Thompson wagged his beard sagely over the lamentable situation they now faced, and remarked that it reminded him of a time when he —

"Quick!" rang Donald's alarmed voice. "Through the logs! Fire!"

Without a word, the men, realizing instinctively what had occurred, shoved the noses of their guns through the loopholes and fired pointblank, without aiming, at the band of men that had stealthily crept upon them from behind while the truce negotiations had been going on.

They were barely thirty yards away, and coming fast, but the withering hail of lead that greeted them crumpled their front line as though it were made of paper. The others, unable to see their assailants, wavered a minute, and then broke, with the exception of one man.

"Hold your fire!" was the order, and the fleeing trappers gained the woods unmolested.

Not so the brave Indian who came on. There was nothing of retreat in his make-up. He had started to charge the fort, and take it. The fort was

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Donald, quicker than he, had swung the man's own musket by the barrel and brought it down with all his might on the fur-covered head.

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still untaken, and he was still alive — two things that seemed utterly incongruous to his mind.

"Don't fire," said McTavish.

On the man came, amid absolute silence. He was at the wall of the fort when suddenly Donald rose to his full height, flung up both arms, and yelled at the top of his voice — the familiar manner of stopping a pursuing wild animal. The Indian, instinctively taken aback, halted, and Donald reached over and drew the gun out of the unresisting hand, while a roar of laughter went up. This was too much for the brave, who, with a fearful curse, drew his knife, and cleared the fort wall at a bound. But he died in mid air, for Donald, quicker than he, had swung the man's own musket by the barrel, and brought it down with all his strength upon the fur-covered head. Instantly, a howl went up from the forest, followed by a volley, which McTavish avoided by the speed of his drop into the trench. But others who had been watching were careless, and did not fare so well. Two of the men, one of them old Bill Thompson, dropped dead in their tracks. The man who had been badly wounded in the first fatalities was now out of his misery, and there remained but seven to guard the furs, and the honor of the Hudson Bay Company. The snow inside the barricade was stained with blood.

But there was no time now to sentimentalize. The dead were passed along from hand to hand and piled at one end, the brave Indian among them. Buxton had lost considerable blood, but he was cheer-

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ful, and Timmins whistled continually. Another man had a ball in his left shoulder, and a third had had his cheek grazed.

Of the free-traders it was impossible to say how many were dead or wounded; Donald, after a moment's careful reckoning, felt sure that more than a third of them, if not half, had felt lead.

Now however, Seguis changed his tactics. The next charge came from three points at once, and Donald met it as best he could with three volleys — one at seventy-five yards, another at forty, and a third at ten — when the dark, frenzied faces and flashing eyes of the free-traders were so close that the streaks of yellow flame seemed to shoot out and touch them. The loss was heavy on both sides, and for the first time inside the barricade demoralization reigned. Had the attackers possessed the one necessary extra ounce of heroism, and pressed on to the goal, they could have won it.

Donald himself went down with the shock of a bullet that broke his left arm; two others of his men, who had stood up in the moment of excitement, were dead, and two others severely wounded. Only the unconcerned Timmins had passed through the ordeal unscathed.

"Water! Heavens, I wish I had some water!" grunted Buxton.

"Say, Tim," called one of the wounded men, "prop me up in front of this hole, and I'll show 'em I'm good yet."

"Same here," said the other, weakly.

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Timmins went back and forth between them, doing what they wished, and loading their guns. Donald, grinning with the pain of his arm, managed to reload his rifle with his right hand. Buxton, swearing softly to himself, accomplished a like feat.

"For heaven's sake, Cap, let me wing Seguis this time, won't you?" begged Timmins.

"Wing him, yes, but don't kill him. I've got a few things I want to straighten out with him, if we ever get out of here alive, and I don't want him dead when I do it, either."

"All right. Look out! Here they come! They must want this place mighty bad to keep this up."

Only fifteen men answered Seguis's yell this time, and they did not seem over enthusiastic. But they swept down the little hill swiftly, scattered wide apart.

"Shoot slow and sure," warned Donald, and a moment later one and another of the attackers began to drop or waver in their tracks. But they came on.

Seguis threw up his arms, and stopped short. Then, he recovered himself, and fought his way onward.

Inside the barricade, Timmins rolled over with a little sigh, and lay still. The logs, chipped and torn by many bullets, were now like a sieve, and one after another of the defenders released his gun, and lay still, or struggled in death throes. Only Buxton and McTavish continued to fire.

This time the wave of advance reached its high mark at the very logs of the fort, and Seguis, with

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a wild yell, swung his gun with one hand, and leaped. Donald and Buxton struggled up to meet the attack, swearing like madmen; but, just at that moment, unseen by all of them, a line of men appeared at the edge of the woods, knelt quickly, and let loose a volley that laid the attackers low.

Followed an uncanny stillness, which was broken only by the horrid sounds of the wounded and dying. Then, down the little declivity broke fifty men, cheering wildly, and a minute later the Hudson Bay Company took possession of its own. They found McTavish and Buxton pale and open-mouthed, regarding their arrival with blank faces. Behind them, the trench was a shambles. Before the barricade, Seguis sat dazedly, one leg pierced, and an arm helpless because of Timmins's bullet in his shoulder. One or two others rested on their elbows, half-conscious.

The newcomers spoke to McTavish, but he did not seem to hear them: his gaze was riveted on something that had started down the incline. He saw a team of six magnificent dogs, dragging a polished cariole of wonderful workmanship. It was piled with furs, and from the curled enamel lip two little staffs arose, and on them fluttered the red flag of the Hudson Bay Company. Among the furs sat a man with a gray mustache and piercing blue eyes.

"Father!" cried Donald, and fell forward unconscious across the bullet-splintered logs.

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CHAPTER XXVI

RENUNCIATION

"I'M proud of you, lad," were the first words that Donald recognized when he came to himself in the little shed-tent that quick hands had erected.

"I'm glad you came," was the simple reply. "They'd have done for us in another half-minute. I don't see why Seguis threw away so many lives trying to capture that fort."

"Dr. Craven says you mustn't talk for a bit, but you can listen while I tell you. Last night, Peter Rainy and I came upon the Fort Severn men in possession of the French traders' supply trains."

"Peter Rainy! Good old Peter! Is he back, too?"

"Yes, but you mustn't talk. Obey orders."

Donald smiled comfortably as he recognized the familiar, brusque speech, and closed his eyes.

"Yes, sir."

"All right. This morning, we had started up here, when he saw a man chasing away from us for dear life. One of the boys recognized him as Seguis, and figured that his men must have come down to try to rescue the trains, but that, when they saw the number in the party, they decided to return to their camp and fight in the last ditch. Naturally,

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when they found you in possession — and I must tell you that was a clever piece of work for a boy — they started in to drive you out. It was their only chance."

Donald smiled again. If he were fifty years old, he would always be a "boy" to his father.

"By that stubborn defense of yours, you have wiped the Free-Traders' Brotherhood out of existence, as well as saved a lot of exceptionally fine furs (so I'm told) for the Company. I don't think the bullets made much headway against that toughness. I'm awfully sorry so many men lost their lives, and, of course, we'll look out for their families, if they have any.

"Now, about the matter that brought me here." The father plunged into this delicate subject with his son fearlessly, but with a deep breath, like a man diving into cold water. "I see, I've got to be pretty much alive if you and I are to get out of it with a whole skin. What I'd like to know is, how they saddle this half-breed on me."

"If you don't know, who does?" The eyes of the son were steady in their wordless accusation. "It's this way, father: If you never married this woman Maria, it ought to be easy enough to prove."

"I didn't marry her."

"Well, then, there oughtn't to be any trouble."

"Oh, yes, there ought, my boy. I didn't say she never had a place in my life."

Donald looked at his father with something of the elder man's piercing gaze, and understood.

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"Then, there were —"

"Relations. Exactly! But no children. After three years, we agreed to separate, and she went back to her people, well provided for, for the rest of her life. She was considered to have done very well. Therefore, having Seguis forced upon me is no light matter."

"I hate to say it, father," Donald said, "but if you look at him carefully, you will see unmistakable signs that spell 'McTavish' as plainly as though it were printed. You know, our family has very distinctive gray eyes and curly hair, with a lick of white on the crown. He has them both. But, tell me, what led you into any such relation? If you had warned me when I was old enough, I would have been prepared for it."

"My boy, I had none of the advantages that you have had all your life. I was born at a little post so far north that it has been abandoned now by the Company. Your grandfather was in charge there, and, when I was old enough, I went out with him, and learned to hunt. Then, later, when I was a man, I was put in charge of another little post on the Whale River, one of those spots where a solitary white man lives for all the winter months alone, only visited occasionally by a passing Indian in need of supplies. Oh, if I had only realized then what I know now, that one's mistakes and wrong-doings bear their fruit in time! Well, at the fort, when the *brigade* went up in the spring, I saw an Indian girl, descendant of a chief. You will understand me

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when I say that I turned away from the advances she made. Our family isn't that kind — I would marry no Indian. My mother was white, all our McTavish women are white. I would have nothing to do with her. But then, that lonely winter post! You've never known it, Donald, that awful solitariness! The first winter I had a couple of papers a year old, and, when the *brigade* went up to the fort, I could almost repeat them verbatim. That's how lonely it was!

"When I thought about that, perhaps I pushed matters a little myself. The girl's parents were dead, and she was knocked around considerably by an old hag who hadn't the heart either to let her starve or to treat her kindly. Well, we fixed it up. I left the fort when the time came, and she followed a week later — and that winter I wasn't alone. It was so for three winters. Then, she began to get shrewish and lose her looks, so I gave her money enough to make her independent (my father had left me something), and we separated with mutual satisfaction. . . . That's the story, Donald."

"It's a hard story, father," said the young man, soberly. "There isn't much kindness in it; it's pure selfishness. Understand, I'm not preaching against the immorality of the thing; people up here are frankly either one or the other, and it's nobody's business much, except the missionary's. But, in the light of what has happened this winter, we would all be happier if you hadn't done it."

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"I know it, my boy, I know it." The hardness of the commissioner's voice broke. "And, so far as I can see, we aren't out of the trouble yet. This man, Seguis, and old Maria may force us to the wall yet. I wonder if I could bribe them off?" He looked pleadingly at his son.

"I don't think so. The old woman is so ambitious for Seguis that she won't take anything but the whole cake, and, besides, why expose yourself to a system of everlasting blackmail, with the chance of their getting angry some time and squealing anyhow? We've got to force them to the wall some other way. When are you going to have a council, and settle this thing?"

"To-morrow morning, my boy;" and the commissioner rose.

Donald noted, with a little pang of sorrow, that his father's face looked older than he had ever seen it, and conjectured rightly that beneath the surface this gruff man, who had raised himself to second in command of the Company, was profoundly, abjectly miserable.

The elder McTavish rested his hand for a moment on his son's well shoulder.

"I'm going out now," he said. "I've tired you enough. Try to rest, or Craven will give me the deuce for rousing you. . . . Oh, by the way, Donald, I know all that's happened between you and Fitzpatrick. Rainy told me. I sent old Bill Thompson up here to command Fitzpatrick's pres-

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ence, when I arrived. Pretty foxy fellow, old Bill; seemed to tell everything, and hear nothing, when it was really the other way about."

"So that was why he came up here so suddenly. Poor old man, he died game."

"And he lived game, which is more than I can say of some people higher up," was the gruff, self-condemnatory appreciation of the dead.

The commissioner was just opening the door of the tent when a bustle and shouting, mingled with the tinkle of sleigh-bells, announced the arrival of a dog-train.

"Hello, father!" cried Donald, "who's that?"

"An old and loved friend of yours."

"If I've got a real friend except Peter Rainy, please show him in."

"It's Angus Fitzpatrick."

"Well, you can show him out; shoot him if you want to. By the way, any one with him?" The sense of dry humor that characterized the elder McTavish took in the situation at once. His eye twinkled briefly.

"There's a round bundle of furs on the sledge. Why?"

"Well, you show that bundle of furs which is my tent, and watch it come to life," was Donald's smiling order.

His father fussed and fumed in apparent rage for five minutes, and finally snapped out:

"Well, all right! But I always told your mother you would be spoiled, if she gratified every one

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of your whims." Wherewith, he disappeared outside.

The next morning found a small and solemn gathering in the large tent that Commissioner McTavish carried with him on his journeys *de luxe*. Present were Maria who had been rooted out of her tree like a bear; Seguis and Donald (both carried in), the commissioner, Angus Fitzpatrick, delirious with fever half the time, and Peter Rainy, gaunt with his record-breaking journey of fourteen hundred miles in four weeks. The day before, there had been a fervent, but quiet, reunion of the old Indian and his young master, in which the banter of the wounded man was barely removed from tears of gratitude. Now, he sat on the edge of Donald's pile of skins, and smoked his vile pipe with complete contentment.

It was a strange company. Angus Fitzpatrick, in the deserted camp of the Hudson Bay Company, had risen from his bed, the old loyalty and discipline urging him on, and, in the face of death itself, had come down at the command of his hated enemy and superior. To the last, he was the uncompromising disciplinarian, more severe with himself than with the meanest underling. The commissioner thought it best to secure Fitzpatrick's story while he yet retained his reason, and addressed him first.

"When did you first learn of this scandal concerning me, Fitzpatrick?" he demanded. "No, lie down!" he commanded, as the other attempted to rise.

"In the middle of last summer, sir. Maria, the

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squaw, came to me with certain proof that made the evidence incontrovertible."

"What proof?"

"A signed statement by a well-known missionary, declaring that he had united you in marriage."

For an instant, there was the absolute silence of amazed horror, in which, presently, broke the snorting and chuckling of Maria, who rocked herself back and forth on her haunches, like some witch muttering over an evil brew.

"Where is that statement?" demanded the commissioner.

"Maria had it the last time I knew of its whereabouts." Fitzpatrick closed his eyes, wearily.

"Maria!" The commissioner's voice was sharp with command and disgust. The withered squaw suddenly stopped her rocking, and opened her little, fire-shot eyes steadily for a moment.

"Douglas!" she said, pronouncing his first name with careless familiarity.

Fitzpatrick, at this breach of ceremony, rose, furious, on his pile of blankets, inarticulate.

But McTavish waved him back.

"Where is that certificate?"

"I have it," replied Maria, sullenly.

"Let me see it." Not many people resisted that tone of McTavish's.

"I refuse," she said.

"You refuse, eh?" The blue eyes darkened to ominous black. "If you repeat that, old woman, you start with me for Winnipeg to-morrow, and you

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spend the rest of your life in jail. You have done me enough injury already to land you in a dozen courts. I'll give you another chance. Let me see that paper. And no funny business. I mean what I say, and you know it. We're at the point now where you, or I, win forever. Come now, dig up, and be quick!"

Perhaps, the flinty hardness, the indifferent crispness, of that voice raised dim memories in the woman's mind, for her glance wavered, for the first time.

"Come on, Maria," interposed Donald, as the old woman framed a whining reply, "the paper is in that muskrat-skin bag around your neck. I know, because I've seen it."

She turned upon him, bristling like an angry cat.

"Yes, and be quick, or you'll have help you don't want," added the commissioner, coolly.

With a snarl, Maria thrust her hand into her meager bosom, and drew forth a little bag with its draw-strings. Under the fascinated eyes of the group, she opened it, and carefully extracted the worn paper.

"Please identify it, Fitzpatrick," ordered the commissioner, and the factor of Fort Severn took the sheet in his hands.

"It's the same she showed me last summer," he said, after a careful examination. "I would know the handwriting of Burns Riley, the missionary, anywhere."

"Good heavens!" cried the commissioner. "Did Burns Riley write and sign that?" He

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reached out an agitated hand, and Fitzpatrick passed over the paper.

"Who was this Riley, father?" asked Donald.

"One of the first men to reach the Whale River districts," was the agitated answer. "When Fitzpatrick and I were your age, he was one of the most famous characters in the Northland, because he carried Christianity in either fist when it was necessary. But he was the squarest man that ever lived, was old Burns."

"Is he dead now?"

"Yes, these fifteen years. Wait a minute. Let me see this." He ran his eyes slowly along the faded lines, and read:

> This is to certify that on April 17, 1873, I united in marriage Douglas McTavish, fur trader at Fort Miskati, son of Duncan McTavish, pure Scotch, to Maria Seguis, Ojibway Indian. "Whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder."
>
> BURNS RILEY, Missionary.

That was all. McTavish saw his whole life go down in wreckage and ruin under the weight of those five or six lines of writing. There was no question as to the authorship — he himself recognized Riley's handwriting, though it was many years since he had seen any of it. And Riley's name was the symbol of righteousness and squareness throughout his whole vast parish, and beyond. The date was the spring that he and Maria had separated for the last time. But he was sure that Riley never wrote the certificate as far back as that.

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"If I only had an ink-and-writing expert here!" he groaned to himself. "But that writing is Riley's all right," he admitted aloud.

Maria began to rock herself again, and to mutter. The commissioner changed his attack.

"Who's this man, Maria?" he suddenly asked, pointing to Charley Seguis.

"Your legitimate son and rightful heir," snapped the squaw, and she went on rocking, while McTavish wrestled with a deadly impulse to strangle her.

"When was he born?"

"In November, 1873, seven months after you sent me away." McTavish did not question this. Acting on Donald's advice, he had observed the half-breed closely, and had detected unmistakable signs of McTavish blood. Furthermore, the man looked his age.

The commissioner turned to Seguis, and questioned him in regard to certain events he would remember, had he been alive at the time Maria claimed.

He answered correctly in all regards, and with a naturalness that showed he had not been coached. The commissioner was satisfied that here was his first-born, and the pang that went through his heart was like a red-hot arrow. But he turned his mind to the necessities of the occasion, not yielding to its griefs.

"Maria," he said despairingly, "you know we were never married. You know you came to me willingly and gladly, when I offered you the only life I would permit myself to offer an Indian. You

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came as my companion until such time as we should see fit to separate; in fact, you were the first to put the idea into my mind. That paper shows me you have done something very wrong. I can't now disprove the statements there: that will come later. But what I want to say now is that you are forcing through one of the dirtiest pieces of work that ever took place in the Company."

Fitzpatrick feebly pawed his beard, and his eyes glittered with triumph. This was what he had waited for — to see the commissioner slowly come to his knees before a filthy squaw, and plead for his life!

"You don't hate me," McTavish continued, "for I never wronged you. When you left me, I gave you enough to make you comfortable. Why did you not tell me of this child?"

"Factors have too many ways of getting such things out of the way," Maria mumbled.

"Fool! Do you think I am a murderer at heart? You lie when you say that. It was ambition that changed you from a pretty Indian girl to a ruthless fiend; ambition for your child that would take him and you up to the heights, perhaps. But not by the open road! The dirty back alleys were what you used to climb, and now you're nearly there. But you never did it alone, never. You enlisted the help of a man that hates me and mine, as a trapper hates a wolverene. A man who has lied to me and tried to deceive me for years; a man who, boasting of his devotion to the Company, has let personal

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animus sway every thought and action for twenty years.

"Yes, I mean, Fitzpatrick. You!" snarled the commissioner, shaking a swift, accusing finger at the factor, who had raised himself on his elbow, his face purple. "You think you have gone on unobserved; and wonder why you were never promoted to York factory, and why honors never came to you as you grew older. Know now that I was watching you and that I knew everything you did — almost the thoughts that passed in your mind. You have persecuted my son, you would have succeeded in taking his life, if your own pretender, Seguis there, hadn't defeated you. Under a mask of loyalty, you've been the one accursed rebel in the Company's ranks, and, if I were a commissioner of the old régime, I'd have you taken out and hanged to a tree this afternoon. But I won't do that. Your own life has been its own punishment. For years, you haven't known a happy day or a contented hour; your venom has eaten your own heart away, and what life remains to you will be more miserable still, because, after all, you go down in defeat, dishonored and disgraced. You are hereby removed from any office and any connection with the Company, and are commanded to leave its territories as soon as you can travel."

The commissioner ceased speaking abruptly, his eyes blazing with fury, and his outstretched arm trembling. The factor cowered before the accusing presence, like a boy caught in a theft, and sank back

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upon his blankets, shame and pain struggling on the scarred battlefield of his face. For him, life had come to a bitter and inglorious end, and, during all that followed, he never spoke again.

There was a minute's pause while the commissioner recovered himself. Then, the thought of his own helplessness and the inevitable ruin that faced him and his returned, and his face grew drawn and hopeless. The triumphant and gleeful chortling of the old squaw attracted his stunned senses.

"Maria," he said quietly, "you have it in your power to ruin and disgrace me — and my boy. Perhaps, it is the punishment for the evil thing I did so many years ago. If so, I accept it. I shall not beg you, or try to buy you, or humble myself. The document you have is a lie, and you know it. Neither you nor your son shall ever receive a cent of money from me. All you can claim is the dirty honor of ruining me. If you want that, take it. I have spoken my last word on the subject." He ceased, and sat, a picture of misery.

Suddenly, there was a choking sound from the opposite side of the tent where Seguis lay.

"I can't stand this!" the half-breed cried. "Listen to me, commissioner! All of you listen! That certificate is a lie, and I can prove it. I —"

There was a raucous scream, and Maria leaped upon the wounded man, and buried her talons in his throat. Rainy and the commissioner seized her, and tore her from her helpless victim violently, hurling her back across the tent, screeching.

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"Silence!" roared McTavish. "Or I'll gag you with your own fist."

The woman subsided, but Rainy took his place beside her, and relieved her of two knives that she made an effort to reach.

"Now, go on, Seguis."

"I didn't know, sir," said the half-breed, "until the other day, that — what I was. Then, Donald McTavish told me, by accident or design, I don't know which. I asked my mother, and she confessed that Donald had spoken the truth. So great was her elation at the success of her claims for me that she showed me that certificate, signed by the missionary. I was as delighted as she.

"Then the next day she told me how she got it, and since then I have been in hell. Oh, sir, you don't know what an existence like mine can be. All my life I have been torn by two natures. I have wanted things that a man of my standing has no right to wish. I have brains, I have intelligence; I want to rise above my handicaps — to be something besides a common half-breed rover of the woods. I headed the free-traders because it gave me an opportunity to do something for myself. When my mother showed me that paper I thought my way was clear, and that I had not worked in vain. But — but, when she told me how she got it — then, the struggle started.

"I am a McTavish, sir, and I am proud of it; but it is that honorable blood that is this minute sending me back to the life I hate, and the oblivion I loathe.

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I can't lie here, and see you and Captain McTavish ruined. The Indian part of me says, 'Yes, take it; no one will ever know.' But the McTavish of me rebels, and I can't do it."

"Yes, yes," cried the commissioner feverishly, "but about the certificate? What about that?"

"I was getting to it, sir. Years ago, I don't know how many, my mother and I were living in a little cabin by a lake during the winter. I was small then, and did not realize the significance of things. One night, we heard faint noises in the woods near by, and my mother went out to see what made them. She found Burns Riley, the missionary, half-insane with suffering, his features frozen, and almost at the point of starvation. He had had a similar adventure to Captain McTavish's this winter.

"My mother saw his plight, and the vague plan that had been in her mind took shape. There, in the snow, she forced the missionary at the price of his miserable life to agree to write that certificate, and, as soon as his fingers could hold the pen and dip it in the soot-ink of the chimney, he did it, and before him sat the food that his words would purchase. Burns Riley was a square man, but his life was at stake, for my mother would have turned him out into the snow as he was, if he had not done as she wished — and he knew it."

"But why didn't he come and tell me?" demanded McTavish.

"Because he was on his way to a mission, at Fort Chimo, on the Koksook River, near Ungava Bay.

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He didn't come back until shortly before he died, and he never saw you. No doubt he was afraid to trust the story of the disgrace of his cloth to a messenger. That, Mr. McTavish, is the story of the certificate. I'm glad I've told it; I'm glad I've relinquished my claims; I'm glad that I am still as honest as the best blood in me. But now," he added drearily, "what is there for me? Commissioner, you have done me the irreparable wrong of making me what I am. All our two lives there can never be any righting of that wrong. I am a half-breed, and must forever yearn vainly for better things that I know I can never attain."

During his words, which were evenly spoken, without excitement, but with intense feeling, the head of Douglas McTavish remained sunk upon his breast. He realized now the irreparable injury that his youth had wrought, and in the depths of his heart he admired this heroic half-breed, who, in the exercise of the truest nobility, was a better man than he. The selfish gratitude for his deliverance was secondary to shame for his own unworthy life and humble worship of Seguis's sterling character.

"Seguis," he said at last, quietly, "you are right; I never can undo the wrong I have done you. But will say this: I admire your spirit and your manhood. I admire the way you sought to defeat us in honorable competition on the hunting-grounds, and the skill with which you managed it. The position of factor at Fort Severn is open, and I wish you to take it. You are one of my most valued men. This

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appointment will be ratified in the usual form when the time comes."

He rose and walked across the tent: Then, he took the left hand of Seguis and pressed it warmly.

"You will accept?" he asked.

The half-breed's only response was a return pressure and a look of glorious gratitude.

"What is to become of me, father?" asked Donald in a half-serious tone of injury.

"You're to come down to civilization as soon as spring opens. I had already decided that this would be your last year in the woods. I need you there to learn the ins and outs of the administrative end. Of course, I'll give you a factory if you want it, but I don't think you need the experience."

"No, I don't think I do," replied Donald. "And then, besides, I have other reasons for wishing to live in a civilized community. I wonder what is the current price of house-furniture?"

A month later Jean Fitzpatrick, her sister, Laura, and Donald McTavish sat in the luxurious drawing-room of the factor's house at Fort Severn. The two women were in black, and Laura dabbed at her eyes occasionally, but with considerable care lest the penciling of her eyebrows should smear. . . . Out in the cold, a little distance away, a fresh mound lay, dun-colored, under the oblique rays of the setting sun.

"Poor father," said Jean softly, slipping her hand

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into Donald's, "I'm glad he's at rest. His life was a bitter one."

"Yes, princess, it is better so. That last sledge ride to the camp in response to orders was the final straw. He never spoke again, did he? Even in regard to our marriage?"

"No, dear, he didn't, and I'm glad, for my mind was made up already. I suppose Seguis will take possession here now?"

"Yes, as soon as we all start for Winnipeg, which will be when the ice is out of the rivers. It will be a long journey; but after it, when you have got some clothes, there will be a big church wedding, and we'll settle down like civilized beings in a real house. Oh, princess, I can hardly wait. I'm still afraid something will take you from me again."

"Nothing ever will, dear boy," she replied, patting his hand. "But look here, Donald," and she smiled, "you haven't arrested Seguis yet for the murder of Cree Johnny."

"No, and I don't need to. The man who reported the crime has finally confessed that he lied about it. Cree Johnny was drunk, and attacked Seguis, who killed him in self-defense. The man who brought the news to Fort Dickey had been Johnny's partner for years, and lied about it out of revenge. Speaking of murders, I would like to know who killed Indian Tom. I really think that a passing hunter mistook him for an animal moving. The deed was done in a storm, which made it very

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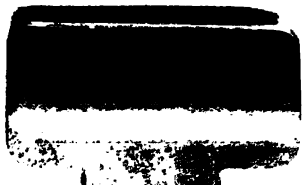

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